



## **The Grace of Materialism**

### **Theology with Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek**

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MADS PETER KARLSEN

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*In the silence you don't know,  
you must go on, I can't go on,  
I'll go on.*

Samuel Beckett

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The Grace of Materialism  
Theology with Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## Abbreviations

The following books by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek are indicated by initials:

### Alain Badiou

**B:** *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*

**BE:** *Being and Event*

**C:** *Conditions*

**D:** *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*

**E:** *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*

**HI:** *Handbook of Inaesthetics*

**IT:** *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*

**LW:** *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 2*

**MP:** *Manifesto for Philosophy*

**M:** *Metapolitics*

**NN:** *Number and Numbers*

**OB:** *On Beckett*

**P:** *Polemics*

**PP:** *Pocket Pantheon: Figures of Postwar Philosophy*

**SP:** *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*

**TC:** *The Century*

**TS:** *Theory of the Subject*

**TW:** *Theoretical Writings*

### Slavoj Žižek

**AF:** *The Abyss of Freedom: Ages of the World*

**CWZ:** *Conversations with Žižek*

**DSST:** *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Essays in the (Mis)Use of a Notion*

**EYS:** *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*

**FA:** *The Fragile Absolute, or Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Fighting For?*

**FTKN:** *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*

**HTRL:** *How to Read Lacan*

**IDLC:** *In Defends of Lost Causes*

**IR:** *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*

**LA:** *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*

**MC:** *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*

**OB:** *On Belief*

**OWB:** *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*

**PD:** *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*

**PF:** *The Plague of Fantasies*

**PV:** *The Parallax View*

**SOI:** *The Sublime Object of Ideology*

**TTS:** *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*

**TN:** *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*

**V:** *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*

**WTDR:** *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*

References to all other texts by Badiou and Žižek will be located in the footnotes. The same goes for any references to websites, which obviously will not include page numbers.



## Prelude: 'Grace to Breathe That Void'

*First last moment. Grant only  
enough remain to devour all.  
Moment by glutton moment.  
Sky earth the whole kit and  
boodle. Not another crumb of  
carrion left. Lick chops and  
basta. No. One moment more.  
One last. Grace to breathe that  
void. Know happiness.*

Samuel Beckett

All their many differences aside, one of the most intriguing messages of both Alain Badiou's and Slavoj Žižek's philosophy is that, although we live in a world in which our course is fundamentally determined by our biological constitution and social arrangements, it can nevertheless occasionally happen that we are given the chance to perform an act of genuine freedom; an act, to paraphrase Badiou, in which *what we do* might exceed *what we are*. Moreover, what Badiou and Žižek agree on, to put it simply, is that the extra-ordinary chance of such an act can emerge, not because it is given to us as a gift by someone or something, but precisely and only because there is literally *nothing* in which it can be grounded. Although their concord ends when it comes to the question of what exactly this nothing *is*, because, as philosophers have known at least since Hegel, nothing is not necessary non-existent, Badiou and Žižek nevertheless agree that since this chance of freedom arises out of nothing, as a consequence, it also has no guarantees, it is always unpredictable, incalculable, unmanageable. This is why we are never 'home free' in the realm of freedom. Rather, when it comes to freedom, doubt forever remains. Or, to paraphrase Samuel Beckett's famous last lines in *The Unnameable*: Against the backdrop of the 'silence' of this nothing that grounds freedom 'you don't know'; so, you will have to decide: will I not go on or will I go on?

This contingency, which follows from the fact that in the end nothing, nothing but a *void*, grounds our world, making it a world in which we do not merely exist, but are once in a while blessed with the chance of freedom, this is the *grace* that according to Badiou and Žižek characterizes a properly

*materialist* philosophy. Yet this grace is not some sort of miraculous redemption. The grace of materialism offers no instantaneous salvation; its ‘miracle’ consists ‘merely’ in the opening of a possibility, while leaving the full responsibility and the hard work of realizing, always anew, this possibility entirely up to ourselves. Thus, the wager of Badiou and Žižek is to argue that a genuine materialism must paradoxically contain an element of grace, it must allow for the chance that something can happen by virtue of which we might break with the established course of the world: an amorous encounter, a political revolution, a scientific invention or an artistic creation, to borrow Badiou’s vocabulary. At the same time, they maintain that such an instance of grace can only be conceptualized properly in materialist terms, that is, as an instance of pure inherent contingency detached from any idea of a determining transcendent Beyond. Accordingly, this is how the title of the present dissertation, *The Grace of Materialism*, should be read: in its double sense as referring both to the materialist element of chance implied in the theological notion of grace, and to the theological moment of grace offered to us in the contingent world of materialism. This wager on a gracious materialism in which ‘miracles happen’ might seem rather surprising considering Badiou’s and Žižek’s renowned ‘militant’ atheism. However, what is undoubtedly even more surprising is that both of them suggest that such a wager can find a significant source of inspiration at the very heart of Christian theology, or in Badiou’s more reserved case, in the margins of Paul’s epistles. How should we understand this suggestion?

This is the issue we will be addressing.

## **Introduction**

### **– Hermeneutical and Methodological Considerations**

*There is no obligatory  
beginning in philosophy,  
philosophy does not  
begin with a beginning  
that would also be an  
origin. Philosophy jumps  
onto a moving train...*

Louis Althusser

#### **How to Begin?**

As Gilles Deleuze notes on the opening pages of chapter three in *Difference and Repetition*, the delicate question of how or where to begin has been a recurrent problem in modern philosophy. One has only to think of Descartes' *Meditations* or the preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. To be absolutely clear, it is by no means my intension here to take on this complex problem per se, or even to go into its detailed history. Nevertheless, it might be useful to sojourn on the subject just for a moment, if for no other reason than the banal fact that not only the philosopher, but anybody who attempts to set pen to paper is confronted with this at once trivial and crucial problem of beginning.

In my particular case the question is quite obviously the following: How, or where, should one begin a Ph.D. dissertation? I would risk the assertion that a rather widespread answer to this question would be something like this: By introducing what your dissertation is about. That is to say, by introducing the 'fundamental' question or problem of the dissertation, or perhaps even its 'core hypothesis'. So, in short, by posing the question: What is the specific problem of the dissertation? However, this question is itself loaded with another no less complicated question. That is, posing the question of what a specific problem is raises, as Deleuze illustrates perfectly well in *Difference and Repetition*, the question of what a problem as such is. In other words, it raises the problem of the definition of a problem, since this question of the definition of a problem as such implicitly conditions the question of what a specific problem is. So, what is a problem?

The immediate and dominant understanding is undoubtedly that a problem is a 'hindrance', 'obstacle', 'dilemma' or maybe

even a ‘puzzle’, which are also some of the main lexical denotations of the Greek word ‘problema’ (πρόβλημα) from which the English word ‘problem’ originates. Yet, this ‘immediate’ understanding is not merely a common sense understanding; it is in fact concordant with the general perception of what a problem is in large parts of philosophy. As is the case with any notion of anything, our notion of a problem is of course determinative in terms of how we relate to whatever it is that we consider a problem. Indeed, it has some quite specific consequences to pose a problem in terms of a ‘hindrance’, ‘obstacle’ or ‘puzzle’. Deleuze (2004, 197) points to two such very important consequences. Namely that posing a problem in this manner will tend to make us believe, firstly, that problems are ready-mades, and secondly, that problems will disappear in the responses or solutions they are given. This line of thought furthermore implies that a problem always calls for or corresponds with a specific – ‘right’ or ‘true’ – solution. What is wrong with this?

Well, according to Henri Bergson (2007, 36), who’s influence on Deleuze is well-known, if we perceive of problems in this way, in terms of ‘obstacles’ or ‘puzzles’ that need to be solved:

One might as well assign to the philosopher the role and the attitude of a schoolboy, who seeks the solution persuaded that if he had the boldness to risk a glance at the master’s book, he would find it there, set down opposite the question.

But, Bergson (2007, 36-37) also suggests an alternative understanding of what a problem could be: “[...] the truth is that in philosophy and even elsewhere it is a question of *finding* the problem and consequently of *positing* it, more than of solving it.” In this perspective a problem is not something we can begin with, but something we end up with. Or, as Deleuze (2004, 203) emphasizes: “A problem does not exist, apart from its solution.” We can only ever answer the question of what our problem is retroactively. Therefore, to begin on these terms is equal to beginning to answer a question whose content we cannot know until after we have answered it. In other words, we must begin, at least in practice, in another way than by posing questions like: What is the problem of the dissertation? Indeed, against the backdrop of this Bergsonian-Deleuzian conception of a problem, the fundamental concern of the dissertation would not be how to solve a specific problem, but rather the question of how can I

pose or create something that in the end hopefully will be the problem of the dissertation.

### **The Basic Decision of the Dissertation**

However, the question remains: How to begin? In a sense, Alain Badiou's major philosophical work *Being and Event* can be read as one long practical lesson in how to answer this question. And to cut a long story short, Badiou's answer is: We begin with a decision. We always begin with a decision and proceed on the basis of a fidelity to this decision, patiently unfolding its consequences and possibilities. First we decide, and then we explore what this decision allows us to do. Although such an initiating decision evidently offers a kind of freedom, it also immediately introduces a constraint insofar that it determines our further course. Moreover, the course that a specific decision marks out for us is of course itself shaped by the particular context in which the decision is set. As all this implies, there is an element of risk involved in making a decision: Was it the right decision? Where will it take us? And not least, do we have the strength to stick to it? Thus, to begin by making a decision is, to borrow Althusser's image, in a certain sense like 'jumping onto a moving train'. So, with which decision will I begin? And what problems will it allow me to pose?

During the last ten years or so there has been a rapidly growing interest in the work of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. This interest in Badiou's and Žižek's work is currently starting to make its way into the domain of theology.<sup>1</sup> There is of course nothing new or surprising about this, given that theology has always throughout its history looked to philosophy for inspiration and assistance, and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> One might even argue that systematic theology, understood as an explanatory and

---

<sup>1</sup> On Badiou see for example Bell (2007), Boer (2009), Caputo and Alcock (2009), Depoortere (2009), Milbank (2005; 2007), Miller (2008), Reynhout (2008); on Žižek see for example Blanton (2004), Boer (2007), Caputo and Alcock (2009), Crockett (2007), Depoortere (2007b), Kotsko (2006; 2008a; 2008b; 2010), Milbank (2005; 2009; 2010), Pound (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Since its beginning, philosophy has had a close relationship to theology, and although this relationship has naturally undergone changes through time - even radical changes as in the encounter with Christianity, the transition from 'philosophical theology' to 'philosophy of religion', or with the birth of modern critique of religion - philosophy is still (some would perhaps say 'again') today deeply engaged in theological matters (see e.g. Greisch, 1998; Grondin, 2002).



conceptual enterprise contrary to the narrative theologies of mythology, has its very origin in ancient Greek philosophy (Dalferth 2001, 19). But, if there nevertheless is something exceptional about the theological interest in precisely these two philosophers, who share a theoretical background in Althusser, Lacan and Hegel, and a political stance on the far left, who detest established academia, and who are engaged in an ongoing debate with each other, it is probably because of an unmistakable tension in both of their works. Thus, while continuously proclaiming their radical atheism and unreserved materialism, both Badiou and Žižek have also openly evinced a firm concern for theology or at least for certain theological matters.

Now, this raises the obviously banal, but nevertheless urgent, question of how best to elucidate the precise ways in which these two philosophers could be of theological relevance. Which is of course also the question of what theological matters, more precisely, we are talking about. This question is, in short, my starting point. And the basic decision of the dissertation is to examine this question.

### **The Main Themes of the Dissertation**

Against this backdrop the next step is to determine some guidelines for this examination. First of all: What are the main themes and notions around which the examination will revolve? I have already – in the prelude – indicated some of these themes, namely grace, materialism and freedom. Besides materialism and freedom, two other crucial philosophical notions or themes will be key focuses of the dissertation: truth and subjectivity. Truth, subjectivity and freedom, these themes, defining for the very configuration of modern philosophy, are at the heart of both Badiou's and Žižek's philosophical projects, composing a fulcrum in their common ambition to revitalize this configuration against contemporary prophecies of its end.

The address of these overwhelming and complex themes are delimited by the specific context in which they appear in the dissertation; that is, they will not be the subject of a general exposition, which would be far beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, they nevertheless play a crucial part in the examination of the dissertation's fundamental question, because in both Badiou's and Žižek's philosophy, truth, subjectivity, freedom, and materialism are in different ways related to major theological themes or notions such as grace, immortality and

incarnation. As hinted in the prelude, in their specific conception of freedom, both Badiou and Žižek, although in slightly different manners, resort to the notion of grace. Following in the footsteps of a long theological tradition, they do not conceive of freedom, which both associate with some sort of rupture with the ordinary state of things, as something which must be thought in opposition to grace, quite the contrary. The theological notion of grace is, as I have also already implied, furthermore employed by both Badiou and Žižek in their conception of materialism. The endeavour to reform our conception of materialism is an important issue for each of these philosophers, and particularly in Žižek's case, this attempt to form a genuine materialism has also lately involved a recourse to other theological resources, primarily the theme of the death of God and the doctrine of incarnation. Besides, in the case of materialism, Badiou and Žižek also both engage with the theological tradition when it comes to their conception of truth. For both, truth is a matter, not of illumination or contemplation, but of intervention and fidelity, to use Badiou's language, something both recognise in the thought of major theological figures such as Paul, Pascal and Kierkegaard. Thus, for both of them, and particularly in Badiou's case, subjectivity is inextricably bound to such a notion of truth. While Badiou moreover implies that his notion of the subject has a forerunner, the subject portrayed in Paul's letters, Žižek draws explicit parallels between the notion of subjectivity that he develops against the backdrop of German Idealism, read through the lens of psychoanalysis and the notion of subjectivity, that can be identified in part of the theological tradition. Let me end this section with perhaps the most controversial theological theme employed by Badiou and Žižek. In another of their shared struggles, Badiou and Žižek have enlisted the at best apparently antiquated and at worst clearly dubious theological theme of immortality, claiming that we must insist, against what Badiou describes as the contemporary worship of finitude, on the immortality of the human subject.

### **Questions of Method**

Concerning the questions of the method of the dissertation I will try to illustrate the essential feature of my basic approach to Badiou and Žižek via a detour through another – yet not entirely unrelated – methodological issue, namely the question of Žižek's

approach to theology.<sup>3</sup> This detour is moreover meant to serve indirectly as an elementary clarification of the implied conception of the relationship between philosophy and theology of the dissertation.

Žižek does not himself in any straightforward manner explain his ‘use’ of theology, and neither does he elaborate on this issue in more general terms by offering an explicit account of how he conceives of the relationship between philosophy and theology in his work. So, how should we approach this issue? I propose we begin with the question of Žižek’s conception of theology. On more than one occasion Žižek has suggested that we ought to understand theology in terms of what Freud called ‘metapsychology’<sup>4</sup> – perhaps most bluntly in an interview conducted in 2007 in which he delivers the following remark:

Theology is another name for metapsychology, for something that is in Man more than Man, the inhuman core of Man etc. These are very precise terms. [...] That is to say that God is not an old man sitting up there pulling the strings etc. God is just a name for this void, openness, this inhuman, more than human.<sup>5</sup>

As Žižek (LA 37; FTKN 206-207; TTS 107-108; OB 95-97, 104; PV 5, 118-119) stresses repeatedly, the Freud-Lacanian name for this inhuman, more than human, excessive dimension in man, which he in the above quote associates with God, is the ‘death drive’.<sup>6</sup> This implicit connection between the

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<sup>3</sup> In regard to the question of the relationship between theology and philosophy in Badiou’s work I will elaborate extensively on this issue in the two first chapters of the dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> In short, ‘metapsychology’ is the psychoanalytical equivalent to metaphysics. That is, as Jonhston (2005, 11) explains, in contrast to the studies in which Freud proceeds on the basis of empirical evidence obtained through the therapeutic practice of psychoanalysis, metapsychology deals with aspects of the psyche that cannot be evaluated on the basis of empirical evidence, but which make up the conditional possibility of the psychic experience postulated by analytic interpretation and its underlying models.

<sup>5</sup> Žižek, “Humanism is not enough.”

<sup>6</sup> Just a brief preliminary clarification: ‘death drive’, which is not a separate drive but an aspect of every drive (Evans 2010, 33), is, as Žižek (PF 112-13; TTS 163-167; PV 62-67) stresses on several occasions, not to be understood as some sort of craving for self-annihilation nor as a parallel to the Heideggerian notion of ‘being-towards-death’; rather, the death drive is the reason why human being cannot be reduced to either (biological) life or death (finitude). I will discuss the notion of death drive thoroughly in chapter four.

metapsychological notion of death drive and theology is made explicit by Žižek (PV 123) at the end of the second chapter in *The Parallax View*: “[...] is not the ‘theological’ dimension without which, for Benjamin, revolution cannot win, the very dimension of the excess of drive, of its ‘too-muchness’?” It is worth noting that the expression ‘too-muchness’, which Žižek uses here as synonym for (death) drive, was first coined by Eric L. Santner (2001, 8) in his book *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflection on Freud and Rosenzweig* from 2001.<sup>7</sup> In this book, Santner (2001, 9) proposes a thesis which is quite close to what Žižek seems to have in mind, namely that: “[...] God is above all the name for the pressure to be alive to the world, to open [up] to the too much of pressure generated in large measure by the uncanny presence of my neighbour.” Another, further, indication pointing in the direction that Žižek (IR 9; PV 88) regards theology in terms of metapsychology is that he employs this name to designate the work of two major theological thinkers, Schelling and Kierkegaard.

However, what is important in the present context, that is, in relation to the question of Žižek’s approach to theology, is that the fact that Žižek thinks of theology as ‘another name for metapsychology’ offers us a useful indication of how he might conceive the relationship between theology and philosophy in his work. Because, while Žižek does not say anything explicitly about this relationship, he does offer a very precise account of how he understands the relationship between psychoanalysis (including metapsychology) and philosophy.

In his introduction to the anthology *Cogito and the Unconscious*, Žižek sketches two customary or standard approaches to the relationship between psychoanalysis and philosophy.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, an approach that focuses on the ‘philosophical foundations of psychoanalysis’, emphasizing that psychoanalysis always relies on a series of conceptual presuppositions which illustrate that it is only possible within a certain philosophical horizon. And on the other hand, an approach in which psychoanalysis attempts to ‘psychoanalyze

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<sup>7</sup> Let me just mention in passing that Santner’s (1997, 2001) work which contains several references to Žižek has left a distinctive mark on particularly Žižek’s discussion in *On Belief* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Žižek and Santner have moreover collaborated in the publication *The Neighbour: The Inquiries in Political Theology* (together with Kenneth Reinhard).

<sup>8</sup> Žižek, “Introduction: Cogito as a Shibboleth”, 1.

philosophy’ by discerning the pathological psychic motivations beneath fundamental philosophical attitudes. Whereas the second approach is ‘deservingly’ no longer taken seriously, we should, Žižek insists, equally reject the first approach. Because, as he notes: “What if psychoanalysis renders visible something that the modern philosophy of subjectivity accomplishes without knowing it, its own grounding gesture, which philosophy has to disavow if it is to assume its place within academic knowledge?”<sup>9</sup> Subsequently Žižek elaborates this suggestion by explaining an alternative approach or method through which it might be possible to accomplish such a ‘rendering visible something that the modern philosophy of subjectivity accomplishes without knowing it’. More precisely, he proposes the following line of procedure:

We are thus playing a double strategic game: this ex-timate kernel of philosophy is not directly accessible to the psychoanalysis conceived of as a branch of psychology or psychiatry—what we encounter at this level are, of course, the ‘naïve’ pre-philosophical theses. What one has to do, is to bring to light the philosophical implications of psychoanalysis, that is, to retranslate, to transpose psychoanalytic propositions back into philosophy, to ‘elevate them to the dignity of philosophical propositions’: in this way, one is able to discern the ex-timate philosophical kernel of psychoanalysis, since this transposition back into philosophy explodes the standard philosophical frame.<sup>10</sup>

Now, what if we displace this approach into the context of the present dissertation, conceiving the relationship between philosophy and theology in a parallel manner; that is to say: What if the modern philosophy of subjectivity in the guise of Badiou and Žižek (in a similar way to psychoanalysis) ‘renders visible something that *theology* accomplishes without knowing it’? Could not the key-concern of this dissertation, that is, the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Žižek, “Introction: Cogito as a Shibboleth”, 2. The term ‘ex-timate’ is Žižek’s anglicization of Lacan’s neologism ‘extimité’. As Evans (2010, 58-59) explains, this term “[...] neatly expresses the way in which psychoanalysis problematises the opposition between inside and outside, between container and contained. For example, the real is just as much inside as outside, and the unconscious is not a purely interior psychic system, but an intersubjective structure (‘the unconscious is outside’). [...] The structure of extimacy is perfectly expressed in the topology of the Torus and of the Möbius strip.”

attempt to elucidate the precise ways in which Badiou and Žižek are of theological relevance, be approached in a manner analogous to the one sketched by Žižek in the above quote? That is, bringing to light an unacknowledged accomplishment or potential of theology which is not immediately accessible to theology via a detour through the philosophies of Badiou and Žižek. To paraphrase Žižek, the method or line of procedure through which such an insight might be realized would thus imply the following: ‘What one has to do, is to bring to light the theological implications of Badiou’s and Žižek’s philosophy, that is, to transpose their philosophical propositions back into a theological framework; in this way, one is able to discern the estimate theological potential of contemporary philosophy, since this transposition back into theology explodes the standard theological framework.’ In short, this is a line of procedure in which the relationship between philosophy and theology is conceived neither as absolutely separated nor as absolutely conflated, but rather in terms of the Lacanian notion of ‘extimacy’, as a Möbius strip which at every point has two clearly distinguishable sides, but when the whole strip is traversed it becomes clear that they are in fact continuous.

However, this moreover suggests, to elaborate on the image of the Möbius strip, that the point at which we have a true encounter between philosophy and theology is in a certain sense always a point of ‘missed encounter’. What I have in mind here is something along the lines of Alenka Zupančič (2008a, 14), who in a discussion of the relationship between philosophy and psychoanalysis in her book *Why Psychoanalysis? – Three interventions* argues that while the psychoanalytical notion of ‘sexuality’ constitutes a singular point that philosophy cannot accept, it is nevertheless this very point that generates that which makes psychoanalysis truly interesting for philosophy. Thus, in a parallel way we could say that while the theological notions of for example ‘grace’ or ‘immortality’ constitute points that modern philosophy of subjectivity cannot accept, it is nevertheless these very points that generates that which makes theology truly interesting for modern philosophy of subjectivity.

Let me conclude these methodological considerations with a brief remark on a few more practical issues concerning my approach to Badiou and Žižek. The method, in the narrow sense of the word, applied in the following consists in examining a number of issues related to the above-sketched themes on the

basis of a thorough reading of central texts from Badiou's and Žižek's oeuvres. Throughout these readings I will draw support from the extensive literature on Badiou and Žižek, occasionally also bringing 'secondary' philosophical and theological authors into the discussion. In the course of these examinations and discussions it is obviously necessary to introduce and clarify different central elements from Badiou's and Žižek's philosophical systems in greater detail. However, since the aim of this dissertation is *not* to provide a regular introduction to the philosophies of Badiou and Žižek, my presentation of such elements will be somewhat fragmented and always subordinated to the specific argument in which these elements appear. Thus, I will for instance at no point offer a full, systematic and consecutive introduction of Badiou's ontology. Rather, I will provide – spread throughout all the chapters of the dissertation – detailed clarifications of a number of elements from this ontology whenever it is necessary for understanding the argument that I am developing at that particular point.

### **The Architecture of the Dissertation**

The dissertation has five chapters. The first and second chapters have Badiou's work as their primary focus, the third and the fourth chapters deal with both Badiou and Žižek, and the fifth chapter is dedicated exclusively to Žižek. These five chapters all aim at explicating the same question, yet they do not progress as one consistent argument in a 'straight line' from A to Z. Rather, the general idea is that every single chapter is supposed to constitute an individual part or study in itself, focusing on a particular matter and presenting a delimited argument, while nonetheless contributing to the elucidation of the main thesis of the dissertation, namely the question of the theological relevance of Badiou's and Žižek's philosophy. Although there is thus no strict argumentative progression between the separate chapters, all five chapters are nevertheless intertwined on several levels; first of all in terms of the overlapping nature of the singular themes that they examine, but also due to the implicit discussion between Badiou and Žižek of these themes.

The *first chapter* examines Badiou's reading of Paul as he presents it in his book *Saint Paul – The Foundation of Universalism*, placing it in the wider background of Badiou's work as a whole. In short, the chapter presents a two-fold argument. Firstly, taking Badiou's (SP 1) claim that he has 'never really connected Paul with religion' as a starting point, it

is argued that Badiou's book on Paul should not be read as part of the so-called 'turn to religion' in contemporary philosophy as it is occasionally suggested, but rather as a part of Badiou's systematic attempt – against the contemporary prophesies of its end – to re-establish the autonomy of philosophy. Secondly, it is argued that viewed against the background of this context, Badiou's interest in Paul is primarily of a philosophical nature; more precisely, this interest concerns the philosophical relevance of Paul's theory of truth.

In contrast to the first chapter, the *second chapter* of the dissertation focuses on the question of the role of religion in Badiou's work. It is argued that Badiou's engagement with religion is primarily of a polemical and critical character. More specifically, three different, but nevertheless closely interrelated, cases in which Badiou engages polemically with religion are identified and elucidated. Firstly, it is argued that Badiou's persistent polemics against what he repeatedly refers to the 'motif of finitude' in contemporary culture can be read in terms of a critique of religion, insofar as Badiou (NN 86) explicitly claims that "The obsession with 'finitude' is a remnant of the tyranny of the sacred." Secondly, it is argued that this 'critique of religion', at least to a certain extent, should be linked to Badiou's attempt re-establish the autonomy of philosophy. Thirdly, with Heidegger as the main example, it is argued that Badiou persistently applies terms such as 'religious', 'theological', 'pious' and 'sacral', as a way to distance himself from or marginalize his philosophical rivals. Moreover, the discussion of Badiou's notion of truth, commenced in the first chapter, is continued in this chapter in terms of a careful exposition of the specific definition of religion that Badiou founds on an absolute opposition between truth and meaning.

After a kind of preliminary 'clearing of the air' in the two first chapters, the *third chapter* moves right into the centre of the theological debate, examining the chances of a fruitful dialogue between (dialectical) materialism and theology. Focusing particularly on Badiou's and Žižek's reading of the doctrines of incarnation and trinity, and with Hegel as the key theoretical reference, it is argued that these readings are fully compatible with the conception of materialism that we find in their philosophies. However, as illustrated in a short return to *Saint Paul*, Badiou himself is reluctant to embrace such a reading, while Žižek explicitly indicates the compatibility of his conception of



materialism and his reading of Christianity. Against this backdrop it is moreover argued, along with Žižek, that due to his resistance to what he considers to be a too Hegelian, or indeed an all too theological, conception of dialectics, Badiou paradoxically risks nurturing a certain 'idealist' or even 'religious' tendency in his own philosophy.

The *fourth chapter* investigates how we should understand the numerous references to immortality made by both Badiou and Žižek, against the backdrop of their theories of the subject and with special focus on the issue of freedom. It is argued that both Badiou and Žižek associate immortality with something inhuman in man, something in which he exceeds his own nature, and that this inhuman, excessive dimension, which paradoxically is precisely what makes man human, is for both of them closely connected to the issue of freedom. Furthermore it is argued that both Badiou and Žižek see freedom as also involving, indeed even relying on, an element of contingency, or in theological terms, a moment of grace. It is furthermore discussed how both Badiou and Žižek relate the capability of immortality to the notion of the subject. The latter moreover associates immortality closely to the Freudian notion of 'death drive'. It is illustrated how this notion is at the centre of an important discord between Badiou and Žižek, and indicates a theologically relevant difference between Badiou and Žižek on the issue of immortality. To put it simply: both Badiou and Žižek associate the death drive with religion, but Žižek does so in an appreciatory way, while Badiou associates the death drive with religion pejoratively by relating it to the theme of finitude.

The *fifth chapter* elaborates on the issue of materialism, arguing that Žižek perceives the relationship between materialism and theology as a dialectical relationship, so that genuine materialism and Christian theology mutually presuppose each other. This argument is unfolded through a close reading of Žižek's extensive engagement with the theological writing of G. K. Chesterton who constitutes one of Žižek's most important theological inspirations. It is argued that Žižek's reading of Chesterton constitutes a particularly good illustration of the dialectical relationship that he claims exists between theology and materialism because this reading follows a trajectory in Chesterton's theological thought from an idealist to a proper materialist dialectic.

# Chapter 1

## The Truth of Paul According to Alain Badiou

*Lacan used to say that if no religion were true, Christianity, nevertheless, was the religion which came closest to the question of truth.*

Alain Badiou

### Introduction

In 1997 Alain Badiou published a small book entitled *Saint Paul - La fondation de l'universalisme*. This book – one of the first by Badiou to be translated into English – is among his best selling works, and has played a major role in the rapidly accelerating popularity he is currently experiencing, far beyond the borders of his native France. At the same time, Badiou's book appeared to be the starting signal for an increasing interest in Paul, and in Christian theology more generally, among several other significant contemporary philosophers and critics.<sup>11</sup> This interest, which in itself may well be remarkable, is certainly no less extraordinary given that the majority of these philosophers consider themselves Marxists or Atheists or, like Badiou himself, both. This mounting philosophical interest in Paul has also left its clear mark on the landscape of theology, as evidenced by a number of conferences and anthologies.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps due to this particular context, there exists a certain tendency in both philosophical and theological circles to read Badiou's book on Paul as part of a larger 'turn' towards or

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<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben (2000); Slavoj Žižek (2000); Michel Serres (2004); Jean-Luc Nancy (2005); Terry Eagleton (2009); Antonio Negri (2009a).

<sup>12</sup> E.g. the following conferences: "Saint Paul and Modernity" (UCLA 2002), "St. Paul among the Philosophers" (Syracus University 2005), "Paul's Journey into Philosophy" (Vancouver School of Theology 2008) and "Political Fidelity and the Philosophy of Alain Badiou" (University of Glasgow 2009). An anthology edited by D. Odell-Scott entitled *Reading Romans with contemporary Philosophers and Theologians* was published in 2007 and a collection of texts edited by J. D. Caputo and L. M. Alcoff from the St. Paul among the Philosophers conference was released under the same title in 2009.

‘return’ of religion and theology in the field of philosophy.<sup>13</sup> It is evident from the literature that deals with it that this turn or return is a complex phenomenon, encompassing aspects of very different philosophical traditions.<sup>14</sup> However, it also expresses itself in a number of more general trends, which can be roughly categorised into three distinct but partially overlapping positions. Firstly, those who advocate a ‘post-metaphysical’ approximation of philosophy and theology (e.g. Jacques Derrida, John D. Caputo) based on the deconstruction of any absolute opposition between faith and knowledge, religion and reason. Secondly, those who speak in favour of a ‘post-secular’ society that recognizes and seeks to draw advantage from religion’s moral resources and potential for social mobilization (e.g. Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor), as a responds to the difficulties that a purely scientific and rationalistic approach seems to have in addressing many of the contemporary human problems. Thirdly, , those who explore new prospects in parts of the Christian theological tradition for revitalizing Marxist or anti-capitalist politics of emancipation (e.g. Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben), in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the celebration of the so-called ‘post-ideological’ age. Among the more general issues or themes that characterize this ‘turn’ are the three following: (i) A discussion of the relationship between philosophy and theology; (ii) a problematization of the dichotomy between the secular and the religious, and by extension, (iii) a renewed interest in the relationship between religion and politics.

In this chapter I will not be presenting a detailed, systematic discussion of these different positions or an examination of the above issues that these positions seem to share. Rather, I simply want to argue that we risk arriving at a grave misunderstanding, not only of Badiou’s book on Paul, but also more generally of his position in relation to the above issues, if we read it in the

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<sup>13</sup> See for example: Caputo (2009); Barker (2009); Benson (2009); Villamea (2008); Roberts (2008a; 2008b); Sigurdson (2007); Kaufman (2007).

<sup>14</sup> The theological and religious turn in philosophy has been discussed among other places in the following works: Niels Grønkvær (ed.) (1998) *Return of God: Theological Perspectives in Contemporary Philosophy*; Hent de Vries (1999) *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Baltimore; Dominique Janicaud (2000) *Phenomenology and the ‘Theological Turn’*; Jayne Svenungsson (2007) *Guds återkomst: en studie av gudsbegreppet inom postmodern filosofi*.

context of and as part of this ‘turn’ towards religion. Furthermore, Badiou, who has written only very little explicitly on religious or theological matters, has himself voiced a few critical remarks on the reception of his work with regard to the issue of religion.<sup>15</sup> I therefore propose that we commence our reading of *Saint Paul* by taking seriously Badiou’s (SP 1) statement on the very first page of the book, that: ”Basically, I have never really connected Paul with religion.” The central question I will examine in this chapter is therefore: If it is not religion that Badiou relates Paul to, then what is it? Or, in other words: What is it about the apostle Paul that interests the atheist philosopher Badiou?

The exposition of this question will, as we shall see, also offer the opportunity to further clarify Badiou’s position in regard to the above issues concerning the relationship between philosophy and religion, and religion and politics. This does, however, necessitate a broader inclusion of the rest of Badiou’s oeuvre, so despite *Saint Paul* being the focal point of this chapter, what follows is not exactly a ‘study’ of that book as such. Nor is it my ambition to extract any ‘implicit’ theology hidden in Badiou’s book, or to evaluate Badiou’s contribution to the field of New Testament exegesis.<sup>16</sup> Although Badiou certainly claims his philosophy (including his reception of Paul) to be of an irreligious and non-theological nature, this does not preclude it from theological interpretations, as he himself has stressed.<sup>17</sup> But neither does it, in my opinion, entail that it cannot

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<sup>15</sup> Badiou, “An Interview with Alain Badiou: Universal Truths and the Question of Religion”.

<sup>16</sup> For a reading that considers the relevance of Badiou’s book for New Testament Studies see Gignac, “Taubes, Badiou, Agamben: Contemporary Reception of Paul by Non-Christian Philosophers”, Barclay, “Paul and the Philosophers: Alain Badiou and the Event” and the volume *St. Paul among the Philosophers* edited by J.D. Caputo and L. M. Alcoff. More specifically, ‘systematic theological’ receptions of Badiou can be found in Adam Miller’s *Badiou, Marion and St Paul: Immanent Grace*, Frederiek Depoortere’s *Badiou and Theology* and Kenneth Reynhout’s article “Alain Badiou: Hidden Theologian of the Void?”

<sup>17</sup> Badiou gives the following reason for this stance: “[...] the religious co-opting of my work exists. It exists however, for profound reasons. It is not only the result of my reference to Paul. It exists because when your work concerns the relation between truth and the event you are necessarily exposed to a religious interpretation. You cannot avoid it. You are exposed because you are no longer confined to the strictly empirical or ontological field” (Badiou, “Universal truth and the Question of religion – an interview

be of any theological interest unless it is subjected to an explicitly theological interpretation. The aim in this chapter is rather to read *Saint Paul* with sound background in Badiou's work as a whole, in order to clarify his broader philosophical errand with Paul; an errand which is certainly not without theological relevance. Philosophy, as we know, has always had a number of important problems in common with theology.<sup>18</sup> The central problem in the following is, as we shall see, the question of how we should conceptualize truth.

Thus this first chapter serves as a starting point for the succeeding parts of the dissertation in two ways: It tries to clarify Badiou's precise interest in Paul through a contextualization of *Saint Paul* in relation to Badiou's work as a whole, and in doing this, it also attempts to weed out the most obvious misunderstandings concerning Badiou's stance toward theology and religion.

### Method and Truth

Badiou has written extensively about key literary figures such as Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé and Samuel Beckett, but unlike many of his contemporary equally literature-interested colleagues – such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida – he has never been particularly preoccupied with the issues of philosophy of language. While Badiou, in his reading of canonical works of philosophy and literary classics, makes a great deal of deliberations about the method and stylistic features of the authors he examines, there are hardly any general hermeneutical or literary-theoretical reflections on his own method in his work.<sup>19</sup> The book on Paul is no exception in this respect. If it is nevertheless worthwhile to make a few reflections on Badiou's unspoken approach in this book, it is because the question of method anticipates in an instructive manner one of

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with Alain Badiou,” 40). This also suggests, contrary to what might seem most obvious, that the theological essence, if there is any, in Badiou's work, should not be sought primarily in the book on Paul, but rather, and thus with more far-reaching consequences, at the very core of Badiou's philosophical system.

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Badiou (SP 5) understands his book as part of well-established trend in modern philosophy counting among others Hegel, Comte, Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, all of whom have written on Paul.

<sup>19</sup> On this issue of lack of methodological reflections in Badiou's work, see Brassier and Toscano, “Postface: Aleatory Rationalism,” 260-264.

the issues that are at the core in the following, namely the question of the relationship between religion and philosophy.

*Formalization versus Hermeneutics*

In terms of considerations of his own approach in *Saint Paul*, Badiou (SP 1) restricts himself to state briefly in the prologue of the book that he does not read Paul's letters as sacred texts, but instead reads them "[...] the way one returns to those old classic texts with which one is particularly familiar; their paths well worn, their details abolished, their power preserved." With this description of Paul's letter as 'classical' one might well think that what Badiou is advocating is a hermeneutic approach similar to, for instance Hans-Georg Gadamer (1993, 289-290), whose notion of the 'classical' refers precisely to the 'lasting power' of an artwork in the form of an, in principle, inexhaustible potential for further interpretation. That is certainly not the case. Badiou explicitly denies that his reading of Paul's letters should be taken as hermeneutic. As he states very clearly, his business is not the revelation of a (hidden) meaning within the writings of Paul.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the unspoken approach of Badiou, is best described as an antipode to hermeneutics.<sup>21</sup> Badiou thus places himself within a broad philosophical and cultural trend in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely the persistent contrast between interpretation and formalization, content and form, history and structure (Hyldgaard 1998, 7).<sup>22</sup> One of the absolute summits of this confrontation between hermeneutics and formalism in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy took place in the sixties with the heyday of French structuralism. And Badiou is indeed deeply rooted in this tradition, not only due to the stimulation of Louis Althusser, who was his teacher at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, but also in terms of the lasting influence of Jacques Lacan's continuation of Freudian psychoanalysis on his work. That being said, the most decisive influence on Badiou in this respect is no doubt his engagement with modern mathematics, which right from the beginning has

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<sup>20</sup> Badiou, "Universal truth and the Question of religion – an interview with Alain Badiou," 38.

<sup>21</sup> In Badiou's often polemical account hermeneutics is not treated very justly, on the contrary, it obviously implies a degree of caricature. For a more nuanced account of the hermeneutical tradition and its relationship to (French) structuralism, to which Badiou in some respects belongs, see Paul Ricoeur (1998).

<sup>22</sup> Badiou (2005) has described aspects of this tendency, for example, in the essay "The Adventure of French Philosophy."

left – and continues to leave – significant marks on his philosophy.<sup>23</sup> Although he does not use the term ‘formalization’ in *Saint Paul*, it seems none the less to be an obvious designation of Badiou’s approach, not least in light of the fact that it is a recurring concept throughout his writings and a concept which he explicitly sets in contrast to hermeneutics.<sup>24</sup>

Formalization, in broad terms basically the process through which a relatively informal practice or way of thinking is given formal expression. In this respect the formalization of mathematics in axiomatic form, such as in Euclid’s *Elements*, is of course paradigmatic. Badiou, however, also uses the word in a somewhat wider sense. For example, in his book *The Century*, in which he, in addition to the formalization of modern mathematics, also describes the new artistic (Avant-gardism) and political (Leninism) practices of the 20th century as the formalization of these areas. The important thing in this context is that, in contrast to a hermeneutic approach, formalization in Badiou’s terms is not a matter of interpretation or understanding, rather the exact opposite; it is a matter of the deterrence of interpretation. As Badiou (TC 162) underlines in *The Century*: “If the work must be interpreted, if it can be interpreted, it is because too much particularity still survives within it, because it has failed to reach the pure transparency of the act, because it has bared its real.”<sup>25</sup> It must be stressed that the ‘real’ here

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<sup>23</sup> There is however a certain overlap between the two latter sources of inspiration, since Lacan (1998, 119), as it is well-known, announced that “Mathematical formalization is our goal, our ideal.” A phrase, that Badiou (C 207, 243; IF 89; TW 15) likes to quote.

<sup>24</sup> Initially it was specifically the formalization of mathematics that interested Badiou, a subject which he deals with in his first book *Le Concept de modèle* from 1969. However, the question of formalization, not only in mathematics, but also in art and politics, is a recurring theme in his authorship, and one that continues to be of importance, for instance in his considerations on the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the book *The Century*. Here he opposes formalization to hermeneutics in the following manner: “The century has come to an end, we have to make its wager ours, the wager on the univocity of the real against the equivocity of semblance. To declare anew, and perhaps this time (who knows?) win, the war within thought which belonged to the century, but which already opposed Plato and Aristotle: the war of formalization against interpretation” (TC 164). For an extensive discussion of the term formalization and Badiou’s diverse use of it, please see: Badiou, “The Concept of Model, Forty years later: An Interview with Alain Badiou.”

<sup>25</sup> This, of course, raises the question whether Badiou’s formalist approach is just a relapse into a kind of (naïve) unmediated ‘intuition’. Against such

should not be taken in the sense of 'reality'. On the contrary, Badiou (TC 64) opposes these two terms in such a way that 'reality', counter to the popular use of the word, assumes the nature of ideology, in the sense that: "It is reality [la réalité] that constitutes an obstacle to the uncovering of the real [le réel] as pure surface."<sup>26</sup> Reality implies, contrary to the pure surface of the real, a depth in so far that it is assumed to *contain* something, a content that begs to be represented and interpreted; in short begs for a hermeneutic. In contrast, Badiou (TC 109) propose that "[...] access to the real is secured through form [...]." Whereas hermeneutics always seeks to interpret content, the formalist approach will evacuate or 'subtract' – and thus exclude the interpretation of – any content. Formalization thus invokes, through this indifference to content, a distance to reality, making it possible to break with its ideological representations and thereby encounter the real. However, it must be stressed that this is not a question of isolating form from content; formalization is not a representation of the real in terms of pure form. The real "[...] is not captured *in* form; it *transits through form*" (TC 154).

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an intuition the hermeneutic tradition interjects that interpretation is unavoidable; any reading is always already also an interpretation. I shall not delve into this question as it requires a more extensive discussion of Badiou's ontology, where as the purpose here merely is to present Badiou's approach in *Saint Paul*.

<sup>26</sup> Badiou's use of the concept 'the real' is strongly inspired by Lacan. Badiou clarifies this inspiration in following way: "What especially interested me about Lacan was his conception of the real. First, the distinction he makes between the real and reality, which is not the same as the classical metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality, or between phenomenon and noumenon. And in particular, this conception of the real as being, in a situation, in any given symbolic field, the point of impasse, or the point of impossibility, which precisely allows us to think the situation as a whole according to the real." (Badiou, "Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou," 124). Thus the real is not reality, but rather that which simultaneously urges and escapes the representations of reality. While both Lacan and Badiou thus understand the real as an 'impasse', Badiou (TS 23) however argues, in contrast to Lacan, that the real, is not only a vanishing point, but that it can be given some form of consistence or passage through formalization: "If, as Lacan says, the real is the impasse of formalization [...], we must venture from this point that formalization is the impasse of the real." On differences between Lacan and Badiou in regard to 'the real' see Žižek, "From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real," 171-178; (cf. TTS 166-167).



Formalization is thus rather a way to participate in the real. An act through which the real passes and is encountered.<sup>27</sup>

The reading, which Badiou presents in *Saint Paul*, can initially be described as formalization in the sense that what interests Badiou in the Pauline epistles is certainly not the content of these letters - in short the message of the death and resurrection of Christ. To Badiou this message is but an irrelevant fable. What interests Badiou is solely the formal structure of that which is stated. Or more precisely, the formal structure of the particular concept or theory of truth which he thinks is laid out in Paul's letters. That the form, not content, is the focal point of Badiou's reading of Paul, is highlighted in several places in the book, including on the very first pages where Badiou (SP 6) states that:

It will be objected that, in the present case, for us 'truth' designates a mere fable. Granted, but what is important is the subjective gesture grasped in its founding power with respect to the generic conditions of universality. That the content of the fable must be abandoned leaves as its remainder the form of these conditions and, in particular, the ruin of every attempt to assign the discourse of truth to preconstituted historical aggregates.

In his reading of Paul's letters, first and foremost Romans and Galatians, Badiou includes a number of key concepts from his major work *Being and Event* to elucidate Paul's conception of truth. Concepts such as 'event', 'evental site', 'situation', 'state of the situation', 'naming', 'intervention', 'forcing' and 'fidelity'. Badiou develops this terminology throughout *Being and Event* to unfold a new and deeply original theory of truth and subject, which has modern mathematical set theory as its

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<sup>27</sup> In *Theory of the Subject* published in 1982 Badiou (TS 23) emphasizes that: "We need a theory of the pass of the real, in the breach opened up by formalization. Here, the real is no longer only what can be lacking from his place, but what *passes through by force*" (Badiou's italics). Badiou's (BE 391-430) theory of the subject, further elaborated in the 1988 volume of *Being and Event*, is just such a theory, in so far that he conceptualizes the subject precisely as the point of forcing through which that which in a given situation is impossible becomes possible in the form of a truth. Or in the words of Badiou (BE 429) himself: "The impasse of being [...] is in truth the pass of the Subject." In *The Century* Badiou also mentions two other approaches to the real besides 'formalization', namely 'purification' and 'subtraction'. For a discussion of these different approaches see Žižek, "From Purification to Subtraction: Badiou and the Real," 178.

main source of inspiration and which, furthermore, can be expressed in the strictly formalist discourse of this discipline. Although it is not explicitly expressed in the book, it seems reasonable to suggest that the concept of truth which Badiou outlines in Paul's letters, by describing its formal conditions through his own terminology, should be understood as a kind of formalization of Paul's conception of truth. A conception of truth which does not revolve around interpretation and understanding, but which by way of Badiou's conceptual apparatus is formalized as a process and an act or gesture. Which, as Badiou (BE 212) puts it in *Being and Event*, implies that: "[...] truth is not a matter of contemplation - or immobile knowledge - but of intervention." Thus, it seems natural to ask whether Badiou also can be said to understand Paul's own venture as a kind of formalization. I will return briefly to this issue at the end of this chapter.

#### *Intervention versus Interpretation*

When Badiou (MP 97-101; C 3-22; IT 39-57) rejects a hermeneutic reading of Paul, it should also be seen in the light of a more profound confrontation in Badiou's work with the so-called 'linguistic turn', which he sees as a reflection of the historicist and relativist character of contemporary philosophy. He therefore tends to describe the latter as 'sophistry' rather than actual philosophy.<sup>28</sup> Badiou (IT 43-47) sees contemporary philosophy as dominated by three orientations, a German hermeneutic orientation, an Anglo-American analytical orientation and a French post-modern orientation, which, despite their apparent differences, share the trait that they have abandoned one of the most basic concepts of philosophy, namely the concept of truth.<sup>29</sup> This classical philosophical concept, Badiou argues, is firmly rejected today across the traditional

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<sup>28</sup> This opposition to the 'linguistic turn' has been given more prominence in Badiou's (TS 188) later work, but it can be detected as early as in *Theory of the Subject*.

<sup>29</sup> Badiou is not the only one to have registered this omission in contemporary philosophy of the theme of truth. In his 1982 lectures on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* at Collège de France Michel Foucault (2005, 189) makes the following interesting comment: "Let's say that there have not been that many people who in the last years – I will say in the twentieth century – have posed the question of truth.[...] As far as I'm concerned, I see only two. I see only Heidegger and Lacan." We might add not only Foucault himself, but also Badiou to this list.

philosophical divides in favour of an overriding focus on language.<sup>30</sup> Or, as he puts it in his rather polemic diagnosis of the present in the first chapter of *Saint Paul*: “The progressive reduction of the question of truth (and hence, of thought) to a linguistic form [...] [is] a point on which Anglophone analytical ideology and the hermeneutical tradition both concur [...]” (SP 6). Most contemporary philosophers will thus guard themselves against any notion of Truth, with its essentialist and totalitarian connotations, focusing instead more modestly on the diversity of historically specific ‘narratives’, ‘discourse rules’ and ‘language games’. This dismissal or dilution of the concept of truth in contemporary philosophy is in Badiou’s view expressed in several ways, however, in our context the main issue is the transformation that this concept undergoes with the hermeneutical tradition.

In the 20th century, hermeneutics launched a devastating critique of the so-called ‘correspondence theoretical’ definition of truth, which has not only been predominant in the history of philosophy, but also widely presumed outside the philosophical sphere. The ‘correspondence theoretical’ conception of truth rests on the common presupposition that truth first of all is a matter of ‘correctness’. Truth is here construed as the accordance between an assertion and the matter that the assertion refers to, in other words, as ‘correspondence’ between language and reality. Hermeneutics replaces this ‘correspondence theoretical’ definition of truth with an understanding of truth as an event.<sup>31</sup> For instance, in the (early) works of Martin Heidegger, truth is understood as the event (*Wahrheitsgeschehen*) in which being is simultaneously revealed and veiled. Heidegger accentuates this ambiguous trait through his use of the ancient Greek word for truth, ἀλήθεια, which he translates as *Unverborgenheit*, i.e. ‘un-concealment’. Since there will always be something veiled or

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<sup>30</sup> According to Badiou the consequence of this is that philosophy is abandoned in its ‘locus classicus’, in which the concept of truth is the fulcrum. This abandonment of classical or proper philosophy is clearly expressed in the announcement of ‘the end of metaphysics’, which in varied versions is put forth by all of these three philosophical orientations. In contrast the basic ambition of *Being and Event* and its sequel *Logics of Worlds* is on precisely show that (and how) philosophy is still - or rather - once again, possible.

<sup>31</sup> This is the case of two of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most important works of philosophical hermeneutics, namely Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*.

hidden in that which is revealed or manifest, truth always requires an explication or interpretation. As a result of this the question of truth is thus transformed to a question of meaning, and in Heidegger's case more specifically, '*die frage nach dem sinn von sein*'. A meaning, which, by virtue of this structure of simultaneous disclosure and concealment, never can be determined once and for all, but is rather open to continual re-interpretation. And so in this perspective any philosophy which continues to take as its task the question of truth must inevitably be some sort of hermeneutics.<sup>32</sup>

While Badiou (IT 61, 85) wholeheartedly endorses the refutation presented by Heidegger, and in the hermeneutical tradition, of the correspondence theory of truth, and the epistemological paradigm upon which this theory rests, he just as determinately rejects hermeneutics' linkage of truth and meaning as a decline of the concept of truth.<sup>33</sup> He thus implicitly rejects hermeneutics as genuine philosophy. According to Badiou (C

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<sup>32</sup> However, according to Heidegger, or at least in Badiou's (MP 47-59) sketch in *Manifesto for Philosophy* of 'Heidegger viewed as commonplace', it is not at all philosophy, suffering as it is from 'a metaphysical forgetfulness of being', but poetry, which is able to think being as a truth-event. In Badiou's view Heidegger thereby practically gives up on philosophy and reduces it to poetry.

<sup>33</sup> The relationship between Heidegger's and Badiou's concept of truth is not as straightforward as it might seem; it cannot be reduced to a question of *either* opposition *or* accordance. As it has been pointed out by several commentators there is obviously a number of immediate parallels between Heidegger and Badiou on the issue of truth: Both of them rejects the correspondence theory of truth, both of them contrasts truth and knowledge, both of them link truth to an event and they both relate the event and truth with concepts like 'nothing' and 'the void' (Hallward 2003, 19; Hyldgaard 2003, 123-124). However, even though Badiou does not himself comment very extensively on Heidegger's concept of truth (for one of his more thorough comments see IT 58-61), it is indisputable that he locates Heidegger in the hermeneutical tradition and explicitly links him to the notion of 'meaning'. This matter thus calls for a more in depth inquire than possible in this context. However, we can perhaps in brief say that the main differences between Heidegger's and Badiou's concept of truth is, first, that while the latter understands truth as a 'subtraction' *from* being, to the former truth is always the truth *of* being. For Heidegger truth is, as Badiou (C 130) puts it, "[...] the very veiling of being in its withdrawal (*retrait*).". And second, whereas Heidegger identifies truth and event (as evident from his use of the word 'Wahrheitsgeschehen'), in Badiou's terms an event and the truth that occurs in its wake are two separate things, since the latter comes into existence only through the post-evental work of subtractive intervention and fidelity.

24) this linkage of truth and meaning is indeed rather the very definition of religion: “I propose to call ‘religion’ everything that presupposes that there is a continuity between truth and the circulation of meaning.”<sup>34</sup> With its ‘revealed-hidden’ structure, the concept of meaning – in parallel with the Christian concept of revelation – is something which is simultaneously constitutive and evasive; sustaining an underlying inaccessibility, which, in Badiou’s mind, is incompatible with modernity’s declaration of the death of God, and in direct opposition to the demythologizing agenda of contemporary philosophy.

Although religion is rarely subject to immediate consideration in Badiou’s work, it nevertheless – like ‘sophism’ and ‘antiphilosophy’ – plays a certain part, namely that of a negative contrast, in his endeavour to (re)define philosophy. And so there is a rather unambiguous relationship of opposition between religion and hermeneutics on one side, and philosophy on the other. Or in Badiou’s (C 14) words: “Philosophy is distinct from religion because it breaks with hermeneutics.”<sup>35</sup> Badiou’s issue with hermeneutics can therefore not be reduced to a matter of mere methodology. It is rather, with the concept of truth as its pivot, a matter of fundamentally colliding definitions of what philosophy (and religion) are. This is quite evident in the following passage from a text on Althusser’s conception of philosophy, which therefore deserves to be quoted in full length:

Within philosophy itself, it [Althusser’s conception of philosophy] distances it from all hermeneutical conception of philosophy. This is an extremely precious heritage. The idea of philosophy as questioning and openness always paves the way, as we know, for the return of the religious. I use ‘religion’ here to describe the axiom according to which a truth is always a prisoner of the arcana of meaning and a matter for interpretation and exegesis. There is an Althusserian brutality to the concept of philosophy that recalls, in that respect, Nietzsche. Philosophy is affirmative and combative, and it is not a captive of the somewhat viscous delights of deferred interpretation. In terms of philosophy, Althusser maintains the presupposition of atheism, just as others, such as Lacan, maintain it in anti-philosophy. That presupposition can be expressed in just one

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<sup>34</sup> This (rather wide) definition of religion is fairly consistent throughout Badiou’s (C 13-14, 24; D 38; B 57; TC 78-79; PP 67) (later) writings.

<sup>35</sup> The identification of religion and hermeneutics is furthermore affirmed, though in positive manner, inside the hermeneutical tradition itself by Gadamer (1993, 428).

sentence: truths have no meaning. It follows that philosophy is an act and not an interpretation (PP 67).

Against this background, one can say that Badiou's method can best be understood as a philosophical act in the sense that it takes the form of an intervention rather than an interpretation, but also in the sense that his formalist reading of Paul is part of a broader foray into the discussion (which as we have seen, indirectly touches on the question of religion) about what philosophy is. That is, into the discussion about whether philosophy is in fact at all possible any more. The book on Paul is thus very much a part of Badiou's (SP 2) own particular agenda, and he concludes the prologue of *Saint Paul* by emphasizing that: "My intention, clearly, is neither historicizing nor exegetical. It is subjective through and through." A clarification of what this subjective intention more precisely entails, and how it will be unfolded by Badiou, is the main objective of the rest of this chapter. Let us begin, however, by taking a brief detour via one of designations or titles that Badiou gives to Paul.

### **Antiphilosophy**

In the very first pages of *Saint Paul* Badiou stresses, as I have already mentioned, that he does not relate Paul to religion. He does, however, use another remarkable term in his description of Paul's letters, namely 'antiphilosophy'. Though, Paul is far from the only one to whom Badiou attributes this term, which he apparently borrows from Jacques Lacan.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, since the early 1990s, antiphilosophy has been a recurring theme in Badiou's attempt to elucidate his conception of philosophy, and

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<sup>36</sup> In an interview Badiou states that: "Lacan declared himself to be an 'antiphilosopher'. It is partly thanks to him that I began to ask myself, in a fairly systematic way, what might be declared antiphilosophical, what was it that characterized antiphilosophical thought, why certain kinds of thought constitute themselves as hostile to philosophy" (Badiou, "Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou," 124). Badiou also underlines that Lacan opened a new career for this word, which originally in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was used as a term for the enemies of the philosophers of the enlightenment (Badiou, "The Caesura of Nihilism," 1). Lacan used the word to define his own relation or non-relation to philosophy, and so it acquires a positive connotation in his use. As Bruno Bosteels (2008) shows in an outstanding article, the word attains a new meaning in Badiou's work, which cannot be reduced to the meaning that Lacan gave to it.

is thus a relatively well-defined category in the late writings.<sup>37</sup> It will therefore be worthwhile to look more closely at what Badiou means by antiphilosophy, how he uses the term in his attempt to separate philosophy from religion and what role the reading of Paul plays in this.

If one reads the texts in which Badiou addresses the theme of antiphilosophy, it is possible to extrapolate a number of rather constant characteristics, which still – due to their manifold combinations – allow the group of thinkers that Badiou places under this heading, to appear as a fairly heterogeneous entity. In a rather long article on Wittgenstein's antiphilosophy, Badiou outlines the following three characteristics or operations, which in his opinion have defined antiphilosophy ever since it began with Heraclitus. Firstly, antiphilosophy is characterized by a linguistic and genealogical critique of philosophy that dismantles its pretensions to truth and systematism. This aspect is also reflected in the interventionist character and fragmentary style of antiphilosophy. Second, antiphilosophy tries to lay bare what is left of philosophy, when deprived of its drapery and ornaments (e.g. Nietzsche's detection of the figure of the reactive priest behind the lies about 'truth'). Herein lays, as there does in the antiphilosophical critique of philosophy's truth-pretensions, a desire to judge philosophy. Thirdly, in opposition to what antiphilosophy deems to be the abstract figment and theorization of philosophy, it invokes a non-philosophical or super-philosophical, more honest and radically groundbreaking act (e.g. Nietzsche's revaluation of values), through which the unutterable is attested. More precisely: "The antiphilosophical act consists in letting that which there is be manifested, insofar as 'that which there is' is precisely that which no true proposition can say."<sup>38</sup> A paradigmatic example is of course the

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<sup>37</sup> During a four year period (1992-1996) Badiou dedicated his seminars to the systematic clarification of the antiphilosophy of four figures of this tradition: Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Lacan and Paul. This furthermore led to the publication of a number of texts which, to lesser or greater extent, deals with the antiphilosophy of these writers. Additionally there are a number of scattered remarks in Badiou's work on antiphilosophy, also in relation to other thinkers such as Pascal, Rousseau and Kierkegaard. And in *Saint Paul* it is indeed first of all other antiphilosophers, predominantly Nietzsche and Pascal, but also Lacan, that Badiou brings Paul into discussion with.

<sup>38</sup> Badiou, "Silence, Solipsism, Sainthood: Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy," 7. I am quoting from Bruno Bosteel's unpublished translation of Badiou's article "silence, solipsisme, sainteté: l'antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein",

revelation, or as in Pascal the miracle, as a testimony of God's action. To these three characteristics one could add a fourth, namely antiphilosophy's conception of the relationship between life and work as a guarantor of authenticity; contrary to philosophy's claim that it, by referencing to a universal reason, speaks in the name of all: "For an antiphilosopher, the enunciative position is obviously part of the statement's protocol. No discourse can lay claim to truth if it does not contain an explicit answer to the question: Who speaks?" (SP 17). This is expressed in the way the antiphilosopher includes his biography in his work, which thus often acquires confession-like character, as is the case with, for example, Rousseau's *Confessions*, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* or Paul's epistles (SP 17; LW 557).

The identification of the traits of antiphilosophy are to be seen in relation to Badiou's insistence, in opposition to the announcement of 'the end of metaphysics' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the need to re-actualize philosophy as an independent discipline, with a subject matter that will not be reduced to Positivist epistemology, Marxist ideology critique, or Poststructuralist deconstruction. One of the most important and original moves in this attempt to retain the uniqueness of philosophy has been Badiou's persistent assertion of the need to rethink three of philosophy's most central, but also the most problematical, concepts. As he (MP 32) declares in his *Manifesto for philosophy*:

I postulate not only that philosophy is possible today, but that this possibility does not take the form of a final stage. On the contrary, the crux of the matter is to know what the following means: taking *one more step*. A single step. A step within the modern configuration, the one that since Descartes has bound the three nodal concepts of being, truth and the subject to the conditions of philosophy.

However, for Badiou, this endeavour to re-establish the independence of philosophy also involves an attempt to redefine the rivals of philosophy. Among these one finds, as hinted above, what Badiou considers to be the contemporary version of the sophists of the antique world. Taking his lead from Plato,

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which is forthcoming in Alain Badiou: *What Is Antiphilosophy? Writings on Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Lacan* (Edited, translated, and with an Introduction by Bruno Bosteels) at Duke University Press.



Badiou (C 3-25; MP 97-101) underlines the need, at the same time, to listen to these contemporary sophists, since their relativism holds a warning for philosophy – not to regress to any absolutism of truth, and to delineate oneself from their linguistic devaluation of the concept of truth, in order to attain a more lucid profile of philosophy itself. In addition to the sophists, but also partly overlapping with them, the main opponents of philosophy are the line of thinkers that Badiou groups under the term ‘antiphilosophy’. Despite the fact that ‘antiphilosophy’, as the word implies, is in opposition to philosophy, like ‘sophism’, the term does not have a purely negative meaning to Badiou (M 49): “‘Antiphilosophy’ certainly does not offend me, since it represents the major determination, in my view, of works of the calibre of Pascal, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Lacan.”<sup>39</sup> As with the sophists, it may also be worthwhile for philosophy to listen to its anti-philosophical rivals, but as a means to restoring its own independence.<sup>40</sup> The question is, however, in what does this independence consist?

According to Badiou (BE 4; MP 37), philosophy is always conditioned by something outside itself. More explicitly, the conditions of philosophy are the events, which occur in the fields of science, art, politics and love, and it is its task to grasp and name the truths that are created within these four areas in the wake of such events.<sup>41</sup> But Badiou also stresses the absolute necessity that philosophy keeps a certain distance from its conditions in order to avoid forming what he calls ‘sutures’ to these. Sutures are formed when philosophy either identifies itself completely with or surrenders its function to one or more of its conditions. In both those cases, philosophy is reduced to something else, be it science, aesthetics, political science or psychoanalysis. Philosophy is thus only philosophy if it manages to sustain a certain distance to its own conditions (MP 61-67). A similar ambiguity exists in philosophy’s relationship towards its rivals. In order to retain its independence, philosophy needs to maintain a balance in its relationships to sophism and

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<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere Badiou states that: “In the end, my theory is that philosophy should always think as closely as possible to antiphilosophy” (Badiou, “Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou,” 124).

<sup>40</sup> As Badiou (C 129) declares in *Conditions*: “A contemporary philosopher, for me, is indeed someone who has the unfaltering courage to work through Lacan’s antiphilosophy.”

<sup>41</sup> See also chapter two in *Conditions* for a short and concise sketch of Badiou’s (C 23-25) conception of philosophy.

antiphilosophy, which, as mentioned, are not to be understood as being in absolute opposition to philosophy, but rather as something like internal tensions within the philosophical tradition. The relationship between philosophy and its rivals is moreover related to the question of the relationship between philosophy and its conditions in the sense that sophism and antiphilosophy have a tendency to privilege one of these conditions, thereby forming sutures. For instance, in the case of Wittgenstein, philosophy is turned into what Badiou describes as ‘archi-aesthetics’, whereas Nietzsche’s antiphilosophy is characterized as ‘archi-politics’.<sup>42</sup>

Another significant reason philosophy needs to retain a close relation to antiphilosophy is that, despite the fact that antiphilosophy includes certain religious traits (primarily the idea of a manifestation of the unutterable through a groundbreaking revelatory act), antiphilosophy constitutes a reminder to philosophy of its own religious tendencies, namely its tendency to reduce truth to a matter of opinion. This relationship between antiphilosophy and philosophy, which could be described as a relationship of ‘critique of religion’, is further complicated in Paul’s case. As Badiou makes clear throughout his discussion in *Saint Paul* of the two antiphilosophers, Paul and Pascal, Paul distinguishes himself by displaying a critical distance from the sort of religious inclinations of antiphilosophy which are reflected in Pascal’s conception of the miracle as proof of truth. Badiou (SP 52) accentuates this element of critique of religion within Paul’s letters in the following manner: “[...] it cannot be denied that there is in him [Paul], and his is alone in this among the recognized apostles, an ethical dimension of antiobscurantism. For Paul will not permit the Christian declaration to justify itself through the ineffable.” According to Badiou, Paul refuses to justify the Christian message (i.e. the event of resurrection) through anything, but his own subjective statement, that is, solely through the declaration of and fidelity to this event. He refrains from covering the weakness this entails with the tacit authority of the miracle, which in Badiou’s (SP 52; 98-99) perspective ultimately makes Paul more rational than Pascal. What is important in our context is that Badiou paradoxically consults Paul to produce a critical distance between the religious

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<sup>42</sup> Badiou, “Silence, Solipsism, Sainthood: Wittgenstein’s Antiphilosophy,” 7; Badiou, “Who is Nietzsche?,” 4.

concept of the miracle, that Pascal advocates, and a concept of the event, which occupies a key position in Badiou's own philosophical edifice. This manoeuvre by Badiou seems even more remarkable given that Badiou (BE 216) proposed the following about ten years earlier in the twenty-first meditation of *Being and Event*, entitled 'Pascal': "Let us say, without preceding any further, that the miracle—like Mallarmé's chance—is the emblem of the pure event, as resource of truth."<sup>43</sup> As proposed by one of Badiou's commentators, this ambiguity testifies to a continuing attempt on Badiou's behalf to balance his concept of the event between two extremes (Bosteels 2005a, 247). On the one hand, a miraculous conception, in which the event assumes the character of absolute novelty, of *creatio ex nihilo*, that is, without any link to the situation in which it occurs. On the other hand, a conception in which the event is in fact not an event at all, because it is reduced to an inherent point in the situation, ultimately making it impossible to exceed the situation and therefore excluding the creation of something genuinely new.<sup>44</sup> Thus, one is tempted to ask if not Badiou's reading of the antiphilosopher Paul should be understood as part of this balancing act. An attempt, in a time which – with the

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<sup>43</sup> In revised version of the text "L'événement comme trans-êtré" which originally appeared in *Court Traité d'ontologie transitoire* published just one year after *Saint Paul*, Badiou (TW 100-101) elaborates his dissociation from any parallel between the figure of the miracle and his own concept of the event in the following way: "It is necessary to point out that as far as its material is concerned, the event is not a miracle. What I mean is that what composes an event is always extracted from the situation, always related back to a singular multiplicity, to its state, to the language connected to it, etc. In fact if we want to avoid lapsing into an obscurantist theory of creation *ex nihilo*, we must accept that an event is nothing but a part of a given situation, nothing but a *fragment of being*." I will return to this problem of the status of the event and its exact relation to the situation (being) in which it takes place in chapter three.

<sup>44</sup> The following remark by Lacan (one of Badiou's primary antagonists on this issue) addressed to one of the participants at a summit in the wake of the events of May 68 illustrates the logic of such a perception of the event: "If you had a little bit of patience, and if you wanted my impromptus to continue, I would tell you that the only chance of the revolutionary aspiration is always to lead to the discourse of the master" (quoted from Bosteels 2002, 174). About the same events, Badiou writes, moreover, in the introduction to *Théorie de la contradiction* 1975: "I admit without reticence that May '68 has been for me, in the order of philosophy as well as in all the rest, an authentic road to Damascus" (quoted from Bosteels 2002, 173).

revolutionary disasters of the 20th century fresh in mind – categorically rejects the possibility of any real novelty, to maintain precisely this possibility, as well as an attempt to harness the latent antiphilosophical or religious inclinations toward absolute inceptions in his own philosophy. It is ironic that while Badiou's reading of Paul strives to detach Paul from his antiphilosophical basis by separating the form of his concept of truth from its mythological content, it appears that this reading of the antiphilosopher Paul also provides an opportunity for Badiou to distance himself from his own antiphilosophical tendencies.<sup>45</sup> In summary, we can say that one of the ways Badiou believes philosophy can maintain both a balance in relation to sophism and antiphilosophy and a distance from its own religious tendencies is by exploiting its opponent's virtues.

It is, in my opinion, largely against the background of Badiou's own agenda to re-establish philosophy that we should understand the above 'subjective' interest in Paul. In the next section I shall attempt to elaborate this in relation to the following three points. Firstly, Paul holds philosophy to a specific concept of truth, which Badiou believes to be defining for philosophy. Secondly, Paul hereby paradoxically shields philosophy from its own religious tendencies, namely the constant propensity to displace the question of truth to an issue of language or opinion. And thirdly, Paul represents at one and the same time a source of inspiration and a warning for philosophy in its relationship to politics.

### **Badiou's use of Paul**

One can of course approach the question of Badiou's subjective interest in Paul in a more direct manner than through the above

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<sup>45</sup> Now, to complicate matters even more, it should be mentioned that the very attempt by Badiou to relieve Paul of his antiphilosophical affinities, i.e. the religious content of his letters, can also be interpreted as an expression of Badiou's own antiphilosophical tendencies grounded in his formalistic approach. This is, in any case, what is suggested by Bruno Bosteels: "I would argue that there is also something about the form itself – the form of the pure event – that is radically antiphilosophical, as Badiou himself shows more clearly in the case of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein" (Bosteels 2008, 179-180). Roland Boer (2009: 179) has raised a similar concern: Badiou's 'purification' of the form from its content may well come under the suspicion of what Adorno has critically termed 'secularised theology' (on Adorno's critique of 'secularised theology' see Boer 2007: 422-430).

detour of antiphilosophy, namely by asking: How or in what ways does Badiou more precisely utilize Paul for his own purposes in his book? I think it is possible to identify (at least) three different concerns or operations: Literary exemplification, Philosophical intervention and Political inspiration. Let's deal with them one by one.

### *Literary Exemplification*

In *Saint Paul*, Badiou proceeds by introducing a number of key terms from *Being and Event* into his reading of Paul's letters, thus making them appear in a very distinct way.<sup>46</sup> This is obviously a mutual process. And so it is no surprise that *Saint Paul* is widely used as an explication of central parts of Badiou's philosophy, originally developed in the far more demanding pages of *Being and Event*.<sup>47</sup> However, this raises the question of whether Badiou's reading of Paul should basically also be read as an illustration, and in that case, as an illustration of what. The most obvious suggestion would be to read the book on Paul as Badiou's exemplification of what he calls a 'truth-procedure'. Indeed, this is a suggestion that has been implied by a number of Badiou's interpreters (e.g. Žižek TTS 141-143; Lecercle 1999, 11; Critchley 2000, 21). Now, the question is of course whether this is a justifiable exemplification or not. In my opinion, the answer is both yes and no. But before I explain this ambiguity, let me briefly recapitulate what Badiou understands by a 'truth-procedure' by briefly paraphrasing Badiou's detailed presentation of this matter in *Being and Event* (parts IV-VIII).<sup>48</sup>

According to Badiou, a truth always occurs in the wake of an event, an unexpected incident, which is the precondition if

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<sup>46</sup> From a traditional exegetical point of view this is of course a completely anachronistic and thus deeply problematic approach. But as I have already implied Badiou is not particularly concerned by such hermeneutical or (as he would more likely term them) 'historicist' considerations.

<sup>47</sup> In their introduction to the translation of a collection of Badiou's texts on Samuel Beckett, Alberto Toscano and Nina Power (2003, xii) argues that "[...] Badiou's writings on Beckett function to some extent as occasions for the rehearsal or *mise-en-scène* of principal components of his philosophy [...]." I suggest that Badiou's reading of Paul can be understood in somewhat similar terms, that is, as a 'staging' of certain elements of Badiou's philosophy.

<sup>48</sup> Badiou (E 40-44; IT 58-68) himself presents a short usefully paraphrase of this matter among other places in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* and in the collection of lectures and essays entitled *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy*.

anything truly new is to arise in a given situation. The new that comes into existence in the wake of an event is a truth. The truth is not something that is attained through contemplation or in terms of knowledge; on the contrary, a truth arises through a break with the established knowledge of the situation, enabled by the event's interruption of the situation, and it persists only by commitment to this evental break. Thus a truth, from Badiou's perspective, is to be perceived along the lines of the logic of 'holding something true' or 'being true to something', such as a cause or a person. In this sense, the truth is a process which is constituted and sustained only in the course of the individuals who through their intervention in a given situation, declare, name and maintain a continued fidelity to an event, and whom Badiou therefore describes as the 'subject' for this event. In other words, a 'truth-procedure' is the operation and the process through which the continuation of an event, in either the field of science, art, politics or love, produces a truth and a subject of this truth.<sup>49</sup> In short, it is the organization of the consequences of an event.

At first glance it seems quite reasonable to view Badiou's account of Paul as a concrete exemplification of such a 'truth-procedure': Following the resurrection of Christ, Paul declares and names this as an event, which he – through his letters and travels – maintains fidelity towards and unfolds the consequences of, resulting in the inauguration of a subject in the form of Christian congregations. However, if this is the case, then it seems reasonable to ask in which of the four mentioned domains this apparent Christian truth-procedure belongs. Is Paul a scientist, an artist, a politician or a lover? Or, is it, as suggested by Slavoj Žižek, rather the case that the truth-procedure which *Saint Paul* seems to exemplify belongs to a fifth and in Badiou tacit truth domain, namely, religion?<sup>50</sup> Yet, such an interpretation is explicitly and categorically rejected by Badiou himself:

Paul is not at all in the same field as my examples of truths in politics, art, science and love. Religion is simply not in the same field. There is something in my friend Slavoj's consideration that is not completely precise because the comparison is not between

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<sup>49</sup> Obviously, *Saint Paul* can thus also be read as an illustration of Badiou's theory of the subject or his notion of the event, but that is merely a matter of words.

<sup>50</sup> Žižek, "On Divine Self-Limitation and Revolutionary Love," 32.

political revolutions, artistic creations, new theories of science, new experiences of love and Paul. The comparison is between philosophy and Paul; that is, between my conception of truth and the Pauline conception of truth. So religion does not make a fifth on the list of politics, science, art and love.<sup>51</sup>

However, Badiou's rejection does not preclude his reading of Paul being seen as an exemplification; it is just not an example of a concrete, historical truth-procedure, but rather an exemplification of a theoretical *conception* of truth.<sup>52</sup> This account is confirmed by Badiou in another interview where he emphasizes that: "What I show is that Paul's line of argument is entirely based on a conception of truth which, it seems to me, in its most general aspects, is perfectly acceptable to me as a philosopher who, in this case, and in many others, can learn something from the antiphilosopher."<sup>53</sup>

However, to complicate matters somewhat, the specific conception of truth that Badiou extrapolates from Paul's writings overlaps with his own conception of truth; that is, truth conceived as the process of a 'truth-procedure'. This is quite clear from the summary presented by Badiou of Paul's conception of truth in four points on pages 14-15 in *Saint Paul*. This summary matches Badiou's conception of truth in terms of a truth-procedure almost perfectly. Most importantly, Badiou states under the third point of his summary that Paul conceives of truth as a process (I will elaborate on the specific parts of this

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<sup>51</sup> Badiou, "Universal truth and the Question of religion – an interview with Alain Badiou," 40; see also Badiou, "Paul the Saint – interview by Jacques Henric," 55. However, Badiou is not completely blameless of this reading of *Saint Paul* as an exemplification of a (fifth) truth procedure. Among other things because he himself has chosen to use the arch-Pauline word 'grace' in more than one occasion as a fitting description of the situation in which we, in the wake of an unexpected event, are given the opportunity to become subject to truth (D 96-97; IT 129; C 270-271; LW 512-514; Badiou, "Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou," 124-125).

<sup>52</sup> However, there is, as demonstrated by Roland Boer (2009, 163-165), some quite 'incriminating evidence' elsewhere in Badiou's work which suggests that he, at least in an earlier stage of his authorship, *did* consider religion to be a domain of truth on a par with art, politics, science and love. This is, for instance, clearly indicated in the following sentence from *Being and Event*: "Saint Paul for the Church, Lenin for the Party, Cantor for ontology, Schoenberg for music, but also Simon, Bernard or Clair, if they declare themselves to be in love" (BE 393; cf. 392).

<sup>53</sup> Badiou, "Paul the Saint – interview by Jacques Henric," 55.

process in a moment). However, and this is the first point of the summary, for Paul the starting point of this process is, according to Badiou, always an event in so far that the subject that declares this event only comes into existence as a result of this event. The second point concerns the subjective character of truth. In Paul's conception, truth is, in Badiou's reading, always subjective in the sense that it involves a declaration, and thus a decision, in relation to the event that inaugurates the truth-process. The fourth point concerns how Paul conceives the relationship between the process of truth and the situation in which this process takes place. In Paul's account, again as presented by Badiou, the process of truth is always a process of subtraction from the way that the situation in which it unfolds normally organizes itself. It thus creates a distance or a break with what Badiou terms the 'state' of and the common opinions within this situation. This distance is the first step in the reorganization of the elements of the situation, enforced by the process of truth creating what Badiou (SP 98) calls a 'generic multiplicity'. Under the third point of his summary, Badiou identifies in Paul the three concepts, which according to him are required in order to think of truth in terms of a process beginning with an event, entailing a subject and producing a generic multiplicity, such as 'faith', 'love' and 'hope'. Or in Badiou's terms, 'nomination', 'fidelity' and 'forcing' (Badiou elaborates on these three concepts particularly in chapters 8-9 of the book). Against this backdrop it seems quite reasonable to describe Badiou's reading of Paul's letters as a sort of 'literary' exemplification of his own conception or theory of truth and subjectivation.<sup>54</sup>

In the conclusion of *Saint Paul*, Badiou introduces another and somewhat more complicated argument against the depiction of Paul's letters as an example of a concrete truth-procedure, implying that religion should be considered a fifth domain of truth. The argument goes to show that since the event that Paul declares and to which he is faithful (i.e. the resurrection of Christ) is 'of the order of a fable', Paul can be regarded as neither an artist, a scientist, a lover nor a political activist (SP 108). In other words, what also precludes the claim advanced by Žižek and others, that Christianity seems to constitute a concrete truth-procedure within the framework of Badiou's own philosophy, is that the event in which Christianity is founded

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<sup>54</sup> In this respect *Saint Paul* is evidently a prolongation of the meditation (twenty one) on Pascal in *Being and Event*.



does not qualify as a genuine event in Badiou's view. This raises two questions. Firstly, how can we distinguish an event, not only from an ordinary occurrence, but also from what presents itself as being, but isn't really a genuine event (i.e. a false event)? And secondly, what does Badiou more precisely mean by his statement that the Pauline event (i.e. the resurrection) is 'of the order of a fable', and why does this disqualify it?

Unlike an ordinary occurrence, according to Badiou, an event always arises without cause or purpose; it is unforeseeable and incalculable. That is, an event cannot be deduced from or reduced to the situation in which it happens, rather it supplements this situation – not as something added, but on the contrary as something vanishing. Or, in Badiou's (TW 124; cf. E 72) words: "I call 'event' this originary disappearance supplementing the situation for the duration of a lighting flash; situated within it only in so far as nothing of it subsists [...]." An event can, therefore, never be objectively determined, nor can it be predicted. Since the event "[...] has no place other than the disappearance of the having-taken-place, it would be futile to ask, using the realist categories proper to the situation, whether it is accurate or merely represents a fiction." From within the situation an event is, as Badiou (TW 124, 114-115; BE 182; IT 62) puts it, 'undecidable'. Consequently, an event is always only manifested as an event retroactively in the form of a subjective declaration of and fidelity to a specific event (TW 124; BE 178-183; E 40-44).<sup>55</sup> On this basis alone it is hard to see why the resurrection of Christ should not pass as an event. However, Badiou's criterion of a genuine event does not concern the inherent qualities of the event, rather, it concerns its effects. More precisely, it concerns the way the event relates to its

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<sup>55</sup> As a consequence of the strong emphasis that Badiou gives to the subjective declaration and naming of the event along with the exceptional nature of the event, a number of critics, among others Jean-François Lyotard, have accused Badiou of harbouring a sort of decisionism à la Carl Schmitt. A comparison originating in Schmitt's (2005, 5) famous dictum that: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." This comparison is of course not less interesting considering Schmitt's (2005, 36) likewise famous claim that: "The exception in jurisprudence is analogous the miracle in theology." However, the question of how deep the similarities between Badiou's concept of the truth-event and Schmitt's logic of exception really run requires a more thorough discussion than the present context allows for. See instead Hallward (2003: 285-291) for a detailed discussion of this matter.

conditions, to the situation in which it took place. To put it in more technical terms: for an event to be a genuine event, according to Badiou (E 72-73), this event must make manifest and name what he call the ‘void’ of the situation, which is normally unrepresented and foreclosed.<sup>56</sup> What makes an event a genuine event is that it is related to the concrete situation for which it is an event only through the unplaceable void that grounds the situation. By being related only to the void of the situation the event is addressed universally, rather than to a particular group, community or people, which would divide the situation in favour of that particular element, instead of affirming its generic equality. So, in plain words, the criterion proposed by Badiou is that if an event is not universally addressed, if it is not an affirmation of the generic equality of the situation, then it is simply not a genuine, but rather a false event.

Badiou offers an illustration of this point in his short book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* with reference to Nazism as an example of a false event. Here he explains why he considers the rise of Nazism to be a pseudo-event in the following way: “[...] the striking break provoked by the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, although formally distinguishable from an event [...] since it conceives itself as a ‘German’ revolution, and is faithful only to the alleged national substance of a people, is actually addressed only to those that it itself deems ‘German’”

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<sup>56</sup> ‘The void of the situation’, which is one of the most important - and elusive - terms in Badiou’s philosophy, is an integral part of and should be understood against the background of the ontology that Badiou presents in *Being and Event* (I give a short survey of the most central elements of this ontology in the beginning of chapter 2). The main contours of the notion of the void (developed in detail by Badiou in meditation 4 and 5 in *Being and Event*) can be sketches in the following way. Badiou’s (BE 23) fundamental ontological thesis is that the One is not. This, on the other hand, does not mean that there is no oneness; rather, according to Badiou (BE 24) the One, the Whole, Unity, is the result of a unifying, or as Badiou terms it, count-as-one operation. However, the fact that the One is a *result* of a counting operation implies that there is something upon which this counting operation operates, something, which is not itself one (BE 24-25). Thus, although everything is counted as one, the counting operation nevertheless leaves a ‘remainder’ as ‘phantom’ of something which is not counted (BE 53). This remainder, which is simultaneously excluded and included in the count, counts as nothing. More precisely as the nothing that names the gap between the one as an operation and the one as a result. This nothing is, as Badiou (BE 55) emphasis, at once unplaceable and all-over, nowhere and everywhere. This nothing cannot be counted, it must be named. It is this nothing that Badiou (BE 55) names the ‘void’ of a situation.

(E 73; cf. P 167-181). Nazism is thus not a genuine event because it grounds its rupture with the situation in which it arises, not in universality (the void), but precisely in the particularity of the German people. The fact that the event is a false event naturally implies that the truth and the subject emerging in its wake must be rejected as well. Although the truth and the subject of Nazism appropriate essential parts of its vocabulary from genuine modern political events, they are in Badiou's vocabulary merely a 'simulacrum'.<sup>57</sup> So, is the resurrection of Christ a pseudo-event and Christianity a simulacrum of truth according to Badiou? This is indeed the conclusion drawn by Žižek (TTS 143) in his reading of *Saint Paul*: "[...] Christianity, based on a fabulous event of Resurrection, cannot be counted as an effective Truth-Event, but merely as its semblance." Badiou himself, on the other hand, does not, at least not explicitly, say so.

This brings us back to the question of what more precisely Badiou (SP 108, 4-6, 58, 76, 81) means when he depicts the Pauline event as 'of the order of a fable'.<sup>58</sup> As Badiou (SP 4, cf. 58) makes perfectly clear on the very first page in the first chapter of *Saint Paul*, he considers the event in which Paul compresses Christianity (i.e. the resurrection of Christ) to be a fable. Succeeding this statement of his position, Badiou (SP 4) offers the following (very) short specification of the term fable:

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<sup>57</sup> From the time of the publication of *Ethics* and *Saint Paul* Badiou has developed his theory of the subject beyond this binary logic of a genuine subject versus a simulacrum of the subject towards a more complex and nuanced understanding of the process of subjectivation. Thus, in *Logics of Worlds* Badiou operates with a 'typology of the subject' that enables him to explain the different subjective reactions to the event, also reactions which he previously simply refused to identify in terms of the category of the subject (reserved solely to fidelity) including what he in *Logics of Worlds* describes as an 'obscure' subject, exemplified by religious orthodoxy or fundamentalism. In short, this 'obscure' subject is characterized by its substantialization of truth, for example by enfolded in the structure of state-power. It should be noted, however, that, if the Christian subject is to be comprehended within the scope of this 'typology of the subject' (something Badiou has not attempted to do, his example is Islam), then it seems to presuppose that he would have to concede to regard the event, to which the Christian subject is a reaction, as a mere fable. Because a subject, even if it is an 'obscure' subject, presupposes that a (genuine) has taken place.

<sup>58</sup> For a thorough discussion of Badiou's depiction of the resurrection-event as a fable, see Roland Boer's (2006) article "On Fables and Truths".

“A ‘fable’ is that part of a narrative that, so far as we are concerned, fails to touch upon any Real, unless it be by virtue of that invisible and indirectly accessible residue sticking to every obvious imaginary.” In other words, Badiou’s claim basically seems to be that resurrection is not a genuine event (but a fable), because it ‘fails to touch upon any Real’. But what does Badiou mean by the phrase ‘to touch upon any Real’? Is it just another way of saying that what disqualifies the resurrection as a genuine event is that, apart from the implicit remainder left in every imaginary, it has no anchorage in reality, that it is just a fiction?

As I have already mentioned, according to Badiou, an event is only an event if it is ‘undecidable’ from within the situation in which it takes place. This means, as Badiou (TW 124) underlines, that “[...] it would be futile to ask, using the realist categories proper to the situation, whether it [the event] is accurate or merely represents a fiction.” Thus, if what Badiou intends to say when he characterizes the resurrection-event as a fable is that it is a fiction, then it indicates that he thinks that this event is not ‘undecidable’, that it *can* actually be decided ‘using the realist categories proper to the situation’ whether the resurrection of Christ is ‘accurate or merely represents a fiction’. If this in fact is the implicit argument underlying Badiou’s characterization of the resurrections as a fable, it would become him well to account more precisely for how it can be decided from within the situation that the resurrection is a fiction. However, if all Badiou wants to say by characterizing the resurrection as a ‘fable’, is that it is a fiction, why doesn’t he just say that the resurrection is a fiction instead? Perhaps we need to take another look at Badiou’s specification of a fable.

As mentioned a moment ago, Badiou (SP 4) in brief describes a fable as “[...] that part of a narrative that [...] fails to touch upon any Real [...].” The fact that Badiou here uses the word ‘Real’ in a capitalized form clearly indicates that he refers to the term in its Lacanian sense. Although Badiou’s understanding of this notion differs from the way Lacan understands it, he does nevertheless concur with Lacan on the point that the Real is not just another term for reality. On the contrary, the Real needs to be distinguished from the latter, although not in terms of the classical metaphysical representational opposition between appearance and reality. Rather, the Real is the point of impasse

in any given situation (reality).<sup>59</sup> As such the Real is a term that, at least in certain aspects, overlaps with another of Badiou's most important terms, namely the 'void'. Now, if we return to Badiou's specification of a fable (as 'that which fails to touch upon any Real') with this overlap between the Real and the void in mind, then what Badiou seems to be saying is that the resurrection-fable is not a genuine event because it fails to touch upon, that is, relate to, the void of the situation, which, as we saw in the above, is precisely Badiou's criterion for a pseudo-event. Although he does not put it in so many words, that Badiou apparently considers the resurrection to be a pseudo-event in this precise sense is also indicated by the fact that he depicts the truth succeeding the Pauline (pseudo-)event in the same vocabulary as when he in *Ethics* describes what he calls 'truth as simulacrum'. This is indicated, for example, in the following statement from an interview on the book on Paul: "[...] the history of Christianity has amply proved that it was not a matter of truth (in the sense I give that word), but of state power [...]."<sup>60</sup>

Let me just end this discussion by pointing out that these indications of the resurrection as a pseudo-event are not very consistent with the fact that Badiou, not only in *Saint Paul*, but also on a number of other occasions, emphasizes Paul's message of universality as a model to follow. For example, in the aforementioned interview he underlines that: "As Paul declares, if Christ really did rise again, then there are no more Jews or Greeks, no more males or females, no more slaves or freemen."<sup>61</sup> The obvious question is if the concrete Pauline idea of universality is based on a pseudo-event, and thus merely a simulacrum, why refer to it as normative? Nevertheless, Badiou's main message is still that since Paul's event does not count as a genuine event, then neither does Christianity inaugurate a new truth-procedure.

### *Philosophical Intervention*

This, however, does not imply that Paul's letters do not represent anything new. Quite the contrary, as the subtitle of Badiou's book suggests, he actually regards Paul as representing an

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<sup>59</sup> Badiou, "Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou," 124.

<sup>60</sup> Badiou, "Paul the Saint – interview by Jacques Henric," 55.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. See also P 108, 162-63, 236 and Badiou, "Universal truth and the Question of religion – an interview with Alain Badiou," 39.

innovation, to be exact, as nothing less than ‘the founder of universalism’. Indeed a rather pretentious claim, which Badiou moderates and clarifies in the conclusion of *Saint Paul*. At this point he enjoins that the title should not be taken to imply there did not exist a concept of universalism, or rather universal truths, before Paul. Badiou’s point is rather that Paul represents a rupture and new stage in the history of the concept. Paul is the first to establish universalism in a singular event: the resurrection of Christ addressed to all mankind. That this event, the resurrection, in fact isn’t an event at all, according to Badiou, does not have the slightest effect on the substance of what Paul has to say to us: “That the event he points to is a fable [...] does not invalidate in any way the body of utterances in which Paul places his conception of what a truth is.”<sup>62</sup> Paul is path breaking, not because he initiates a new scientific, artistic, political or amorous truth, nor because he is the founder universalism as such, but because his letters contain the elements of a new theory of truth in terms of what Badiou describes as ‘universal singularity’. In other words: A theory that illustrates the formal conditions of a universal truth and the singular subject that arises (at a singular point in time) in the wake of an event. As Badiou puts it in an interview: “I read Paul as a text about a new and provocative conception of truth and, more profoundly, about the *general conditions* for a new truth.”<sup>63</sup> But this does not, as I have

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Hereby Badiou also rejects, contrary to what Žižek maintains, that there is a problem concerning the fact that what seems to be the best example of his theory of truth (and subject) does not itself constitute a truth. As an interesting twist, it should be mentioned that Žižek (PD 173-174) argues that regarding this problem there is a relationship between Badiou and Heidegger, and that this relationship has to do with a shared formalist approach: “An unexpected additional link between Heidegger and Badiou is discernible here: they both refer to Paul in the same ambiguous way. For Heidegger, Paul’s turn from abstract philosophical contemplation to the committed existence of a believer indicates care and being-in-the-world, albeit only as an ontic model of what *Being and Time* deploys as the basic transcendental-ontological structure; in the same way Badiou reads Paul as the first to deploy the formal structure of the Event and truth-procedure, although for him, religion is not a proper domain of truth. In both cases, the Pauline experience thus plays the same ex-timate role: it is the best exemplification (“formal indication”) of the ontological structure of the Event – albeit, in terms of its positive content, a “false” example, foreign to it.”

<sup>63</sup> Badiou, “Universal truth and the Question of religion – an interview with Alain Badiou,” 38. This point is also confirmed by Badiou in a more recent interview: “What I say is that we can find in Paul a very complete theory of

emphasized, make Paul himself a subject of truth. Paul is not a scientist, an artist, a politician, or lover; he is a theorist of truth. Nevertheless there is something blatantly paradoxical about Badiou's claim: While Paul's letters do not contain a particular truth, they do seem to say something true about truth in general.<sup>64</sup> It is the same ambiguity that can be detected in Badiou's endorsement in *Being and Event* of Lacan's suggestion that 'if no religion is truth, Christianity comes closest to the question of truth', which, as Badiou (BE 212) elaborates, he takes to mean the following: "[...] in Christianity and in it alone it is said that the essence of truth supposes the eventual ultra-one, and that relating to truth is not a matter of contemplation – or immobile knowledge – but of intervention." If Christianity, as presented by antiphilosophers such as Paul, Pascal and Kierkegaard does not constitute a truth in Badiou's terms, Badiou (SP 108; BE 222; LW 426) does nevertheless acknowledge that it presents an 'entirely militant theory of truth'.

However, Badiou (BE 222) does not concern himself with such ambiguities; quite obviously he has no intention or interest in elaborating on this (nevertheless admittedly admirable) feature of Christianity, as he assures us: "[...] I am rarely suspected of harbouring a Christian zeal [...]." Badiou's (SP 70) concern is to extract, through his own philosophical concepts, this (true) Pauline theory of truth as universal singularity from the mythological context in which it is embedded, so that it comes to appear in a completely 'secular' form.<sup>65</sup> While he is thus very

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the construction of a new truth. Allors! Why so, the theory of the construction of a new truth. The beginning of the truth is not the structure of a fact but it's an event." Badiou, "A Discussion of and around *Incident at Antioch: An Interview with Alain Badiou*," 7.

<sup>64</sup> A point also emphasized by Žižek (TTS 143) on several occasions, maybe most clearly in the following passage from *The Ticklish Subject*: "[...] the problem remains of how it was possible for the first and still most pertinent description of the mode of operation of the fidelity to a Truth-event to occur apropos of a Truth-event that is a mere semblance, not an actual Truth." See also PD (174) and Žižek, "On Divine Self-Limitation and Revolutionary Love," 32.

<sup>65</sup> A matter, which Badiou (BE 222) can be said to anticipate, albeit deploy in a much lesser extent, in the meditation on Pascal in *Being and Event*, in the end of which he (in contrast to the secularist tradition running from Voltaire to Valéry who regret that Pascal wasted his genius on the religious nonsense of Christianity) justifies his interest in Pascal following way: "It is too clear to me that, beyond Christianity, what is at stake here [in Pascal] is the militant apparatus of truth [...]." Badiou (LW 401) understands his

careful to make clear that he does not recognize the (theoretical) break that occurs with Paul as grounded in an event, it seem as if Badiou, perhaps because of this, ends up diminishing the consequences of this Pauline break. Or to put it in other words, Badiou does not exactly overstate the interesting fact that the origin, and hence the historical condition, of what he claims to be the *philosophically* adequate conception of truth, i.e. truth as universal singularity, is indeed *antiphilosophical*. However this does not necessarily, as suggested by John Milbank (2005, 401), entail the failure of philosophy to grasp this concept of truth altogether, rather it says something important about the close and constructive relationship between philosophy and antiphilosophy.<sup>66</sup>

Since Paul's message is based on a fable it does not constitute a truth that we can be faithful to in the same manner as Badiou insists that we still can (and should) be faithful today to the truths that came to exist in the wake of genuine events, such as the French Revolution and the revolts of May 1968. What Paul can offer instead, according to Badiou, is theoretical inspiration for contemporary philosophy to rethink the concept of truth. In Badiou's view, it is crucial to the continued existence of philosophy to maintain and to reform its key concepts, including the concept of truth. With this as impetus, and in light of the tension between philosophy and its rivals, I think that Badiou's reading of Paul can be regarded as a kind of philosophical intervention. The question is, precisely what it is that philosophy can learn from Paul when it comes to the concept truth. In a way, the whole book on Paul can be read as an answer to this question, to which Badiou relates more explicitly in the conclusion of *Saint Paul*. Here he emphasizes Paul as a warning to the philosopher not to try to reduce the conditions of truth to a purely conceptual matter; a warning that applies both to the origin and the destination of truth (SP 108-109). Philosophy should realize that it must take an event as its starting point, if it is to think the truth adequately in its singularity as well as in its universality, as something which applies to everyone at the same time, but without the constraint of transcendence. Regarding the

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reading of Kierkegaard in *Logics of Worlds* in a similar way as beyond Christianity, as 'secularized'.

<sup>66</sup> It is noteworthy that most of the philosophical thinkers referred to in the sections on the concepts of truth, subject and event in *Being and Event*, is actually antiphilosophers (Pascal, Rousseau and Lacan).



designation of truth, Paul can, according to Badiou (SP 109), offer philosophy the following lesson: “There is no authority before which the result of a truth procedure could be brought to trial. A truth never appertains to Critique. It is supported only by itself and is correlate of a new type of subject, neither transcendental nor substantial, entirely defined as militant of the truth in question.” Philosophy must at once both maintain the universality of truth and recognize the radical commitment that it involves.

To try and think truth in this manner is, in Badiou’s opinion, a very urgent task today. Why? The short answer is because our present situation is characterized by a pacifying relativization of truth. We are in a situation that, in Badiou’s view, is dominated by a false universalism in terms of the abstract homogenization of capitalism on the one hand, and an escalating process of fragmentation of identity in terms of ‘identity politics’ and ‘multiculturalism’ on the other hand. This is a situation in which not only politics, but all four domains of truth and their truth procedures are at risk of being relativized or even perverted. That is, a situation in which art is reduced to ‘culture’, science to ‘technology’, politics to ‘management’ and love to ‘sex’, the result being that any creation of universal truths is excluded.<sup>67</sup> Precisely in such a situation, devoid of any real commitment and universal pretensions, philosophy could learn a lesson from the conception of truth sketched in Paul’s writings. In a rather programmatic formulation in *Saint Paul*, Badiou (SP 6) puts it like this: “To sharply separate each truth procedure from the cultural ‘historicity’ wherein opinion presumes to dissolve it: such is the operation in which Paul is our guide.” Or as he writes, after having outlined in four maxims the requirements related to the conception of truth as ‘universal singularity’ and therefore dictating Paul’s fundamental problem: “There is not one of these maxims which, setting aside the content of the event, cannot be appropriated to our situation and our philosophical task” (SP 15). It is in this sense that Badiou’s book can be said to constitute a philosophical intervention; a philosophical intervention, which, as I have already suggested, therefore also has a political dimension. I will elaborate more on

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<sup>67</sup> See also Badiou’s (E 23-27) *Ethics* for a further elaboration of the contemporary situation in which, according to Badiou, any genuine idea of universalism has been abandoned in favour of the a hypocritical ‘respect for differences.’

this issue below, but first a very brief intermezzo on critique of religion.

As noted above, Badiou points out an aspect of critique of religion in his reading of Paul, namely the latter's distance to a certain religious idea in antiphilosophy of revelation of the ineffable through a groundbreaking action, for instance, as in Pascal's case, in the form of a miracle. This interest, on the part of Badiou, in Paul as a 'critique of religion' should be perceived in relation to the ambivalent relationship between philosophy and antiphilosophy outlined earlier. Antiphilosophy may assist philosophy by shielding it from its own religious tendencies. Or, as Badiou puts it in relation to Nietzsche: "Anti-philosophy puts philosophy on guard. It shows it the ruses of sense and the dogmatic danger in truth. It teaches it that the rupture with religion is never definitive. That one must take up the task again. That truth must, once again and always, be secularised."<sup>68</sup> The anti-hermeneutic concept of truth that Badiou produces through his reading of Paul's letters may, in light of this remark on the warning-function of antiphilosophy, paradoxically, be seen as a secular corrective to philosophy's own religious-hermeneutic tendencies to reduce truth to a matter of meaning. We can thus say that there are two types of 'secularization' that can be identified in Badiou's reading of Paul, because Badiou also understands his formalistic reading of Paul as a secularization or perhaps rather de-mythologization of the latter's theory of truth.

### *Political Inspiration*

That brings us to the third and last dimension of Badiou's subjective interest in Paul, namely what we might term 'political inspiration'. If one is to believe one of Badiou's most competent commentators, Justin Clemens (2006, 116), there is a clear connection between Badiou's secularization understood in the latter sense, and the political potential of Paul's writings:

One must not underestimate this aspect of Badiou's work, which, having pure reason as a paradigm, induces him to repudiate all forms of religious and theological thought. This does not mean that he does not engage with examples of such thought. On the contrary, he makes committed intervention into such thought, by essaying to detach what he *de facto* treats as the pure thought of such thinkers from the 'religious' impurities in which they have become enmired. In this approach, somebody like Saint Paul becomes an exemplary

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<sup>68</sup> Badiou, "Who is Nietzsche?," 10.

*political* militant and thinker, who ought to be extracted from his religious envelope, including from the history of the church.

While a number of commentators argue that the political dimension of Badiou's reading of Paul is best understood by enrolling it in a comprehensive trend within the Marxist tradition – from Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky through Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin to Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton – that emphasizes a certain similarity in the 'revolutionary' aspects of Marxism and Christianity (usually in terms of a shared utopian, eschatological or messianic dimension),<sup>69</sup> what makes Paul political in Clemens' presentation of Badiou's reading, is certainly not the religious or theological aspect. On the contrary, the point of the citation seems to be that Paul will only be political the moment that his letters are purified through Badiou's formalistic reading of their theological and religious influence. Thus, Clemens' comment raises the following very interesting question: If *Saint Paul* can be read as an indication that Badiou considers Paul as a resource for political renewal in the current situation, in which Marxism seems to be in profound crisis, how then should this indication be understood more precisely? Does it imply that Badiou endorses the idea that there exists a connection between Christianity and Marxism in terms of a shared utopian or messianic dimension? Or does Badiou's reading of Paul rather involve a critical encounter, not only, as has already been hinted with religion, but also with the Marxist tradition? Moreover, does the underlying question concerning the issue of whether Marxism is seen as a break with, or rather a sort of secular continuation of, Christianity, involve an unspoken judgment on the validity of the theorem of secularization?<sup>70</sup> These questions are obviously important for our understanding

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<sup>69</sup> For an exhaustive survey of the role of Christianity and the Bible in 20th century Marxism, see Roland Boer (2007; 2009): *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology* and *Criticism of Religion: On Marxism and Theology II*. Similar comparisons have also been made by theologians such as Jurgen Moltmann, Johann Baptist Metz (Adams 2007; Ashley 2007), and numerous figures of Latin American 'liberation theology' (Löwy 2008). See also John Robert's (2008a; 2008b) instructive article "The 'Return of religion': Messianism, Christianity and the Revolutionary Tradition".

<sup>70</sup> Another way of posing this last question could be by asking on what side Badiou would be on in the famous controversy between Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg on the matter of 'the legitimacy of the modern age'. See Beck Lassen (2005).

of not only of Badiou's (political) interest in Paul, but also his apprehension of the relationship between religion and politics.

There is little doubt that there is a widespread conviction according to which Badiou along with several other thinkers (more or less) attached to Marxism, primarily Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek and Antonio Negri, are taken to be the latest branch of a trend within Marxism towards a more sympathetic approach to religion and Christianity in particular. Such a reading has moreover been reinforced by particular circumstances in the reception of *Saint Paul* and perhaps especially through Žižek's part in this reception. Although Žižek himself candidly, and indirectly through his many references, confirms the pervasive influence of *Saint Paul* on the books in which he deals with theological themes, it is nevertheless the case that there is a certain tendency to read Badiou in continuation of Žižek (who has a considerable part in the growing interest in Badiou's work) rather than vice versa.<sup>71</sup> Besides, there is little doubt about Žižek's opinion as to where Badiou stands on the issue of the relationship between Marxism and Christianity. This is quite clearly indicated, for example, in the introduction to *The Fragile Absolute*. Here Žižek (FA 2; cf. TTS 142) suggests the following strategy in response to the well-known polemical portrayal of Marxism as a mere secularized version of Christianity reproducing the same messianic or eschatological conception of history: "Following Alain Badiou's path-breaking book on Saint Paul our premise here is exactly the opposite one: instead of adopting such a defensive stance, allowing the enemy to define the terrain of the struggle, what one should do is to reverse the strategy by *fully endorsing what one is accused of*; yes, there *is* a direct lineage from Christianity and Marxism [...]."

If we turn to Badiou himself, it does appear at first glance as if there is quite substantial support for the kind reading that Žižek proposes. Not only does Badiou refer to Marx, Lenin and Mao in *Saint Paul*, but on several occasions throughout the book he also mobilizes the standard Marxist rhetoric; especially in his characterization of Paul's biography and his doings, as when he speaks of the church as 'party', or the brothers as 'comrades' in the second chapter of the book. Thus, Paul is described as a

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<sup>71</sup> This is probably due to the fact that *Saint Paul* was only translated into English in 2003, that is, *after* the publication of all of the three books, in which Žižek explicitly engages with theology, but also that Žižek (including his reception of Badiou) is at present still read more widely than Badiou.

staunch leader who through his personal commitment and his written interventions organizes a political faction (SP 20-21); a description, which fits quite well with the parallels between Paul and Lenin proposed by Badiou (SP 2, 31) more than once throughout the book. The reflections in *Saint Paul* on Pier Paolo Pasolini's never realized script for a film about Paul, in which Pasolini, according to Badiou (SP 39), 'reflects on communism through Paul', also seem to support the idea that Badiou agrees with the presumption of a sort of revolutionary kinship between Christianity and Marxism.<sup>72</sup> However, the most substantial basis for asserting that Badiou (SP 2) proposes a parallel between Marxist politics and Pauline Christianity is perhaps his remark in the introduction of *Saint Paul* that:

If today I wish to retrace in a few pages the singularity of this connection [between an event and a subject] in Paul, it is probably because there is currently a widespread search for a new militant figure – even if it takes the form of denying its possibility – called upon to succeed the one installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the century, which can be said to have been that of the party militant.

Is not what Badiou says here exactly that *Saint Paul* should be read as an attempt to outline, using the example of Paul, a post-Leninist version of political militancy? Is the point not precisely that, if Marxism is to reinvent or reform itself after the violent failures of the 20th century, there is an important lesson to be learned from Paul and the Christian tradition? The obvious answer is of course: Yes! But, if we take a closer look at the issues supporting such a reading – in particular Badiou's use of the term 'militant' – the picture might become a little less clear. Before we turn to these matters, let us begin with a brief clarification of Badiou's view on the underlying issue linking Christianity and Marxism, that is, the issue of eschatology and messianism.

Whether the aim has been to discredit Marxism as a pseudo-religion or legitimize Christianity as a progressive social movement, the numerous parallels drawn throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century between Marxism and Christianity have almost always had the issue of eschatology and messianism as their fulcrum. While this issue is also at the very centre of recent engagements

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<sup>72</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini *San Paolo*. See also Mariniello (1999).

with the Judeo-Christian tradition by Marxist or leftwing philosophers like Jacob Taubes (2004), Jacques Derrida (2006), Giorgio Agamben (2005) and Antonio Negri (2009b; 2010), it is not at all a concern in Badiou's book on Paul. When Badiou (SP 93), in chapter nine of *Saint Paul*, enters into the discussion of how he understands the theme of hope (ἐλπίς) in Paul's letters, and mentions eschatology, it is only to dismiss the notion. According to Badiou (SP 93-95), there is no such thing as a Pauline eschatology in terms of hope in a future event in which ultimately justice will be done, separating the saved from the condemned. As Badiou (SP 97) sees it, the Pauline conception of hope is the concrete and patient work for the universality of a truth, not the projection of an abstract ideal of justice to come. For Paul "[...] hope has nothing to do with the future. It is a figure of the present subject [...]." This distinction between present and future is also what is at stake in a short passage from *Polemics* in which Badiou – in contrast to *Saint Paul* where he does not even use the term – comments upon the issue of messianism in Paul. Here Badiou (P 207) argues that: "With Paul, for example, we have a notion that is not contained in the idea of messianism, since at issue is the process of coming of God himself, such as *it has taken place*." This distinction between present and future is, as Žižek (OB 126) emphasizes, also the decisive difference between a Christian and a Jewish messianism, between the Messiah as someone who has already arrived and the Messiah as the one who is always to come. Moreover, these two different conceptions of the messianic event also imply two different forms of politics: a (Jewish) 'politics of perpetual postponement', in which it is never really the time to act,<sup>73</sup> versus a (Christian) politics, in which the key problem is the organization of post-evental discipline and fidelity. According to Badiou, this is, as we shall see now, exactly the problem shared by Paul and Marxism.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> In *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism* Žižek (DSST 153-154) argues that such a perpetual postponement is exactly the political consequences of Jacques Derrida's messianic reading of Marx in *Spectres of Marx*.

<sup>74</sup> Let me just note in passing that in their article "Plasticity and the Future of Philosophy and Theology" Clayton Crockett and Catherine Malabou (2010, 23) places Badiou (along with Benjamin, Agamben and Derrida) within a 'messianic paradigm' arguing that despite Badiou's claims that his understanding of Paul is not messianic, the reading of Paul he presents in the above quote from *Polemics* fits precisely Agamben's definition of

Taking a closer look at the way Badiou employs Marxist vocabulary in *Saint Paul* it shows that he primarily uses it in the context of his description of Paul as an organizer of the congregation or what is to become the church.<sup>75</sup> Indeed his juxtaposition of Paul and Marxism is precisely (as suggested in the above quotation on Lenin) aimed at a shared organizational feature; or rather, a common organizational problem. Namely the problem of how a subject of truth can be organized so that its militant fidelity towards an event can be sustained, while avoiding the same organization turning into a rigid dogmatic form, and thus a substantialization of the truth that pacifies the militant engagement of the subject, the way that it has happened to the communist parties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and several times throughout the history of the church). The juxtaposition made by Badiou is therefore not intended to highlight a common revolutionary potential (in terms of a shared utopian-eschatological or messianic dimension), but rather to suggest an alternative (political) organizational form. This issue of (political) organization is also, according to Badiou, a main concern of Pasolini in the latter's reading of Paul.

Nevertheless, this organizational issue is not the primary concern of Badiou himself. Rather, as we have already seen, in his reading of the Pauline epistles, Badiou (SP 38) is primarily interested in Paul as a 'theoretician of truth'. And it is also in the context of this interest in the Pauline conception of truth that we should understand the word 'militant', which Badiou uses frequently in *Saint Paul*. Apparently, and especially in light of the above quotation, it seems obvious to take the term 'militant' to be synonymous with 'political activist', that is, as a designation of a 'political subject'. However, such an interpretation clearly supports the idea that Badiou's main concern in reading Paul is to be understood in terms of political inspiration, upholding the thesis that Paul is an important political resource for Badiou. And from there on it is a short step to fully enrolling him into the circle of other contemporary Marxist philosophers and intellectuals who praise Christianity for its revolutionary potential. It can of course not be denied that Badiou uses the word 'militant' as a term to explain what he

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Christian messianism (the event has taken place, but has not yet been brought to an end).

<sup>75</sup> In *Being and Event* Badiou (BE 392) describes the church precisely as the post-evental 'operator of faithful connection to the Christ-Event'.

means by a political subject. But, as it is clearly stated in the following passage from the preface to the English translation of *L'être et l'événement*, Badiou (BE xiii) uses the word 'militant' as a more general term for the 'subject of truth' in everyone of the four domains truth: "The militant of truth is not only the political militant working for the emancipation of humanity in its entirety. He or she is also the artist-creator, the scientist who opens up a new theoretical field or the lover whose world is enchanted."<sup>76</sup> Thus in short, being a 'militant' does not necessarily have anything to do with being politically engaged but, rather, it has to do with being a subject to truth.

As to the aforementioned parallels drawn by Badiou in *Saint Paul* between the militant figures of Lenin and Paul, this is not a new idea, but has its precedent in *Theory of the subject* from 1982. Here Badiou explicitly compares Christianity and Marxism. However, the comparison he makes does not refer to a presumed common revolutionary or utopian aspect; it rather refers to a specific characteristic concerning the origin of these two movements. Both movements, Christianity and Marxism, are, according to Badiou, characterized by having a twofold beginning. Marxism began of course with Marx (and Engels), but it was only with Lenin's organization of the party that an actual Marxist subject was instituted. In the same way, Christianity began with Christ, but only with Paul was it organized as a church.<sup>77</sup> In a comment on Lenin's writings, Žižek resumes this parallel – though without any explicit reference to Badiou – in an intriguing way, inviting us to return to the question of whether Paul's letters can be understood as a kind of formalization. Žižek writes:

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<sup>76</sup> As the passage suggests Badiou (TS 28) has previously reserved the word 'militant' for political subject for the simple reason that he (as late as in *Theory of the Subject*) were of the opinion that: "Every subject is political. That is why there are few subjects and rarely any policy." Following the conceptual framework developed in *Being and Event* and *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Badiou (C 305; cf. BE 329) extends his uses of the word 'subject', and hence also the term 'militant', to all four areas of truth.

<sup>77</sup> Badiou's analogy between Paul and Lenin is probably (once again) inspired by Lacan (1998, 96-97), who in his Seminar XX suggests that he himself is for Freud what Lenin was to Marx. Or, as Badiou (TS 126) writes in *Theory of the Subject* referring precisely to this particular seminar of Lacan's: "Lacan is the Lenin of psychoanalysis."



We should introduce the key dialectical distinction between the founding figure of a movement and the later figure who formalized this movement: Lenin did not just adequately translate Marxist theory into practice – rather he ‘formalized’ Marx by way of defining the Party as the political form of its historical intervention – just as St. Paul ‘formalized’ Christ and Lacan ‘formalized’ Freud.<sup>78</sup>

In other words, Paul’s letters constitute a sort of formalization, in the sense that the church represents the form of the intervention Paul pursues following Christ. Whether Badiou in a similar matter conceived of Paul’s letters as a kind of formalization, the way that Žižek obviously does, is not quite so clear. Badiou does not use the word ‘formalizing’ a single time in *Saint Paul*, but he comes close. For instance when he describes Paul’s letters as a reduction in which “everything is brought back to a single point: Jesus, Son of God, died on the cross and was resurrected”; and as a “forceful extraction of an essential core of thought” (SP 33). In the same paragraph he concludes that: “The result of all this is that Paul’s epistles are the only truly *doctrinal* texts in the New Testament” (SP 33). This is a phrase that naturally raises connotations to Badiou’s description of his own formalized theory of truth as a ‘doctrine of truth’.<sup>79</sup> In any case, Badiou’s juxtaposition of Lenin and Paul, Marxism and Christianity, obviously does not refer to a shared emancipatory or revolutionary aspect, but is once again rather a question of an organizational parallel.

But despite these common organizational concerns, it appears that Badiou is of the opinion that there is actually much more that separates Marxism and Christianity than unites them. For instance, in an interview from 2007 he comments on the relationship between religion and Marxism (or rather Communism) in the following manner:

In this case, religion presents itself as the surrogate for something else that has not been found, something that should be universalizable, should be able to uproot itself from the particularity of the religious. It is for this reason, I think, that Marx still seems so current. Communism, according to Marx, is essentially internationalist in character.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin’s choice,” 191.

<sup>79</sup> Badiou, “On a finally objectless subject,” 94.

<sup>80</sup> Badiou, “‘We Need a Popular Discipline’: Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative - Alain Badiou Interview by Filippo Del Lucchese

Religion, including Christianity (at least as it has evolved after Paul) and Marxism/Communism is, in Badiou's view, obviously not positively related through a common revolutionary aspect. On the contrary, they seem to be in stark opposition to each other, since religion is merely an imitation of or substitute for the real thing, namely communism. The crucial difference here is that while religion, at least in practice, is always bound to some kind of particularism, then communism has in Badiou's view a truly universalistic character.<sup>81</sup> If indeed Badiou can be said to agree with Žižek in that Paul represents a universalistic legacy which is still worth fighting for, then it seems that Badiou, in contrast to Žižek, who clearly connects this legacy to Christianity, assumes a somewhat more ambiguous position in regard to this connection. Badiou is happy to refer to Galatians 3:28 as an example of a universalist way of thinking, yet it is not Christianity, but rather the trans-historical configuration, stretching from Spartacus through Thomas Müntzer to Saint-Just, which Badiou terms 'invariant communism', with which he associates the idea of universalism, and that for Badiou therefore constitutes the legacy worth the fight (Badiou & Balmès 1976, 60-75; MS 100; IT 131-132).<sup>82</sup> The obvious contradiction that consists in referring to Paul as a representative of universalism, while rejecting religion, including Christianity, with reference to its particularism, can only be dissolved if we take Badiou at his word when he refuses to associate Paul with religion. Pushed to the limit, we can say that what is truly provocative about Badiou's reading of Paul is not that he suggests that the founder

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and Jason Smith," 655. For an enlightening clarification of Badiou's rather complex relationship to Marxism, see Alberto Toscano's (2007) article "Marxism Expatriated: Alain Badiou's turn". Unfortunately Toscano does not relate his discussion of Badiou's Marxism to the question's the relationship between Marxism and religion.

<sup>81</sup> It is of course tempting here to turn Badiou's objection to Christianity against himself: Has communism not precisely proved in practice *not* to be universalistic?

<sup>82</sup> In the pamphlet *De l'ideology* from 1976 Badiou and his co-author François Balmès mentions Thomas Müntzer and the German peasant revolt as an example of what they call an 'invariant communism'. However, from the rest of the names on the list of 'invariant communists' you get the feeling that Müntzer is included in this category not so much *because* of his Christian affiliation, but rather *in spite* of it.

of Christianity is a militant communist, but that he asserts that the militant Paul is not at all religious.

By this Badiou has, if not in any other way, clearly signalled where he stands in regard to the normative question about the relationship between religion and politics. Let us in conclusion quote – from a recent interview in *Libération* – his response precisely to the question of whether he believes that there is a close relationship between religion and politics: “My position on this matter, reinforced by a recent trip to Palestine, is that today it is absolutely imperative to separate politics from religion, just like it should be separated, for example, from racial or identity questions. Religions can and must coexist in the same country, but only if politics and the State are separate.”<sup>83</sup> In view, not only of this rather unequivocal statement, but also the above discussion of Badiou’s standpoint on the relationship between Marxism and Christianity, there is little evidence to suggest that Badiou sees any positive political potential either in the Christian tradition or religion as such. Quite the contrary.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to clarify three interrelated issues in Badiou’s book on Paul. First, I have examined the inexplicit approach that characterizes Badiou’s specific reading of the Pauline epistles. I have here argued that his reading of Paul can be characterized as a formalist, in contrast to a hermeneutic approach, and that this confrontation is to be understood against the background of a more general confrontation in his work with the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ in contemporary philosophy, including in particular his critique of the key concept – in the hermeneutic tradition – of ‘meaning’. This discussion of Badiou’s approach leads to a wide-ranging discussion of competing notions of what philosophy, and closely related to this, religion, is or should be. Secondly, I have tried to illustrate how we must further understand Badiou’s statement in *Saint Paul* that his concern or intention in the book ‘is neither historicizing nor exegetical, but subjective through and through’. I have argued that this ‘subjective’ intention can be identified through three coherent aspects or dimensions, which can be summarized under the following headings: literary exemplification, philosophical intervention and political inspiration. At the heart of all three of these dimensions lays the

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<sup>83</sup> Badiou, “On Communism – Alain Badiou in *Libération*”

same issue, namely Badiou's interest in the specific theory or conception of truth, which he believes can be found in *Saint Paul*. This is a conception of truth which may be considered as an intervening illustration of Badiou's own theory of truth, and which also provides a potential in terms of critique of religion. Finally, I have given some indication of Badiou's position in regard to the three themes mentioned in the introduction as characterizing the thesis of a return to religion or turn to theology in current philosophy. On this issue, I believe I have shown that there is rather solid support to conclude that Badiou's book on Paul, and his work more generally, should not be read as a part of such an alleged turn or return. Badiou's philosophy is neither post-metaphysical nor post-secular, just as there does not appear to be any substantial indication that Badiou actually believes that 'there is an intimate relationship between Christianity and Marxism' as Žižek seems to argue.

Whether Badiou's philosophy can be placed within the framework of the proclamation of the return of religion in philosophy, despite his own explicit opposition to this, or whether he, in a sort of Heideggerian sense, is part of this turn exactly by trying to break free from it, is another discussion. Moreover, let me emphasize that I am of course not claiming that Badiou in some extraordinary way is able to completely avoid 'doing theology' (he is after all reading a text soaked in theology), nor that a theological reading, extracting the implicit theology, of Badiou's reading of Paul could not be an interesting endeavour, but only that the reading that I have presented here is not first of all a theological reading, at least not in this (narrow) sense of the term.



## Chapter 2

### Against the Metaphysics of Finitude, or, Badiou's 'Critique of Religion'

*The obsession with  
'finitude' is a remnant of  
the tyranny of the sacred.*  
Alain Badiou

#### Introduction

In contrast to many contemporary continental philosophers, who tend to follow Nietzsche (1998, 8) in his 'mistrust of all systematists', Badiou has no quarrel with the systematic vocation of philosophy. On the contrary, he has on several occasions emphasized not only the systematic character of his own philosophy, but that this vocation is an essential part of any philosophy worthy of the name: "To my mind, it's one and the same question to ask whether philosophy can be systematic and whether philosophy can exist at all."<sup>84</sup> However, Badiou (D 2) is, as he has emphasized himself, also an extremely polemical philosopher – a point on which he certainly *does* take after Nietzsche. The most suitable way to approach his philosophy is perhaps therefore not merely to focus on his philosophical system, but as Peter Hallward (2004, 1), one of Badiou's most esteemed readers, has suggested, through the controversies in which he engages.<sup>85</sup> And when it comes to Badiou's engagement with religion and theology<sup>86</sup> it seems indeed to be the case that polemics take precedence over any systematic exposition. However, this should not be reduced to a merely personal

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<sup>84</sup> Badiou, "Being by numbers – Lauren Sedofsky talks with Alain Badiou,"

<sup>85</sup> See also Badiou, "An Interview with Alain Badiou: Universal Truths and the Question of Religion," 41 and *Manifesto for Philosophy* (MP 65).

<sup>85</sup> On the polemical character of Badiou's philosophy see also Toscano (2000), Bosteels (2001, 229), Clemens (2003, 194) and Hallward (2003, xxii).

<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately Badiou does not really – explicitly or implicitly – distinguish clearly between religion and theology. It is simply not an issue that concerns him. He mostly uses the term 'religion' and in contrast to 'theology' he does actually have an explicit, fairly clear and consistent, definition of 'religion'. Consequently, and for the sake of convenience, I will as a general rule from now on keep to this term.

idiosyncrasy or stylistic matter, something with no relation to the coherent, systematic part of Badiou's philosophy. Badiou's polemical stance toward religion is somehow a necessary consequence of his philosophical system. Let me try in a few words to explain why.

An essential implicit condition of Badiou's philosophical practice is Kurt Gödel's famous incompleteness theorem, which, put very simply, states that any consistent (mathematical) system will generate an undecidable proposition.<sup>87</sup> To Badiou this implies that a decision must be taken. As for instance in the case of ontology, as Badiou (BE 23) makes clear in his reading of Plato's *Parmenides* in the first meditation of *Being and Event*, we are confronted with the following undecidable proposition: Is Being one or multiple? We cannot know empirically, so we will have to make a decision. Given that there are no grounds for this decision, it must take place as a kind of 'wager' as Badiou sometimes depicts it with reference to Pascal. And as Justin Clemens (2003, 208) explains:

[...] such an ungrounded decision will be necessarily *polemical* – and such a polemical decision is integral to the practice of philosophy itself. Badiou's own system cannot be both consistent *and* complete; neither can it prove its own consistency. Which doesn't mean that it cannot assemble arguments in support of its own position; on the contrary. But these *arguments* will not be of the order of *proof*. They will necessarily be *narrative* and *polemical*.

As we will see in a moment, Badiou's decision in respect to ontology is that 'the One is not'.<sup>88</sup> It is in relation to this decision

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<sup>87</sup> Badiou's most exhaustive discussion of Gödel's incompleteness theorem is in one of his earliest texts entitled "Marque et manque: à propos du zéro" (particularly the appendix) publishes in 1969 in *Cahiers pour l'analyse*.

<sup>88</sup> This is, as Hallward (2004, 15) emphasizes, one of Badiou's most insistent ontological principles, another is that 'every situation is infinite'. These two principles obviously collide with the traditional Judeo-Christian conception of God as one and of the infinite as a characteristic reserved solely for the divine. Badiou sometimes leaves the impression that these principles, the 'death of God' and the 'secularization of the infinite', is not a matter of decision, but that they can be justified by set theory and that an ontology based on set theory therefore enables a scientifically grounded atheism. To determine whether set theory really warrants these principles would of course involve a thorough examination of set theory in relation to Badiou's ontology. However, this is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Moreover, such an examination already exists; it is the main concern of Frederiek Depoortere's (2009) substantial study *Badiou and Theology*.

we should understand his polemical relation to religion and theology. This suggests that a way to elucidate the significance of terms like these in Badiou's philosophy could be to question the polemical role religion plays in his work. Or, to put it simply: What are the polemical functions of religion, and what are the controversies to which this term is linked, in Badiou's philosophy?<sup>89</sup>

I think it is possible to identify at least three different, but also closely intertwined points concerning this issue. Firstly, in his critique of what could be termed the contemporary 'metaphysics of finitude' in its various guises – in philosophy, in art, in ethics, in politics – Badiou (NN 36; B 29, 124; TW 27; LW 228) refers repeatedly to religion. So, if there is something like a 'critique of religion' in Badiou's work, which I will argue there is, it is not a kind of straight forward and explicit critique, but rather something resembling, in certain ways at least, the more general 'critique of metaphysics' proposed, for instance, by Nietzsche and Heidegger, though in a more indirect sense, since

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Depoortere's (2009, 95-127) conclusion can basically be summarized in the following critical comment on the issue by Hallward (2004, 15): "Ontology [set theory] alone does not establish either principle: the axiom of infinity certainly does not imply that all sets or situations are infinite, and, as Cantor's own piety suggests, the fact that there can be no all-inclusive set of all sets does not by itself disprove the existence of a properly transcendent limit to the very concept of set (a limit to the distinction of 'one' and 'not one')." "

<sup>89</sup> Of course, another essential issue concerns the possible theological interpretation of Badiou's own philosophy. Basically there are two different aspects – a constructive and a critical – of this issue. The first concerns theological attempts to embrace Badiou's work by for instance tracing a 'hidden God' in his declared atheist philosophy; only a few such attempts have been done. In terms of ontology I agree with Kenneth Reynhout (2008, 16) who has convincingly argued that there is really only one place in Badiou's ontology where it might be possible to locate, or rather fit in, a notion of God, namely in what Badiou terms the 'void'. However, I also agree with Frederiek Depoortere (2009, 124) that this identification of God with the void only comes at the prize of [...] dropping everything which traditionally made God, God." Thus, in short, I do not find this road very passable. But, there is of course also another dimension of Badiou's philosophy which is open for theological interpretation, namely his theory of the event. And this leads us to the second aspect, which concerns the numerous criticisms raised against what is claimed to be Badiou's 'religious' or 'theological' conception of the event in the more specialized parts of the Badiou-reception (e.g. Bensaïd 2004, 98, 101; Smith 2004, 93; Osborne 2007, 25-26; Johnston 2008a, 35, 38). I will investigate this second aspect in the next chapter.



neither critique of religion nor of metaphysics is the definitive issue to Badiou.<sup>90</sup> Secondly, Badiou openly stages his determined attempt to re-establish philosophy as such through its de-suturing from poetry (or more generally from ‘Romanticism’) and its re-entanglement with mathematics, as a confrontation with religion. And thirdly, Badiou persistently applies terms such as ‘religious’, ‘theological’, ‘pious’ and ‘sacral’, as a way to distance himself from or marginalize his philosophical rivals; perhaps most persistently in the case of Heidegger, but also when it comes to his critical engagement with Deleuze.

By examining these three ways in which Badiou critically tries to dissociate himself from religion, or from a series of ‘religious’ issues, I hope to be able to encircle the more exact character of this term, and subsequently clarify the role it plays in his philosophical system. However, since Badiou’s engagement with religion from the very outset is subordinated to his polemical interventions, to the philosophical and political controversies in which he engages, it is obvious that the notion of religion, that hopefully will begin to appear throughout my reading, in no way is completely coherent or without contradictions. Again, it never has been the intention of Badiou to provide any orderly composed outline of this notion; rather it seems to be a kind of negative ‘by-product’ of his polemics and to some extent it therefore needs to be ‘extracted’ from his

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<sup>90</sup> If we can talk about a critique of metaphysics in Badiou, which I obviously think we can, it is nevertheless in another sense than in both Nietzsche and Heidegger. Badiou does without doubt continue the Nietzschean-Heideggerian critique of metaphysics in the sense that he wants to surmount metaphysics as onto-theology (defined as ‘the commandeering of being by the One’). But he breaks with the Nietzschean-Heideggerian critique of metaphysics in the sense that he does not identify metaphysics wholly with onto-theology; or in other words, to Badiou (B 30; H 42) a none onto-theological metaphysics is possible, which he occasionally refers to as ‘metaphysics without metaphysics’. So, in a certain sense Badiou has no ambition of an ‘overcoming’ or even a ‘*Verwindung*’ of the metaphysical tradition or Platonism. On the contrary, his philosophy is nothing if not an attempt to ‘take another step’ in this tradition continuing the ‘platonic gesture’ (MP 32). Thus, there is both a critical and constructive engagement with metaphysics in Badiou’s work. Though the two aspects are intertwined, in this chapter, I will be focusing on the former aspect. For a further elaboration on these issues, see: Badiou, “Metaphysics and Critique of Metaphysics.”

writings.<sup>91</sup> Although there are a few direct encounters with the Christian theological tradition in Badiou's earlier writings, e.g. in the form of extensive references to Thomas Müntzer in *De l'idéologie* (1976), a short discussion of the theological model of Hegel's dialectics and a lengthy excursion into the heresies of Arianism and Gnosticism in *Theory of the Subject* (1982), his engagement with religion is closely tied to an attempt to restore philosophy's autonomy by critically separating it from, not only religion, but also sophism and antiphilosophy. This task of systematically outlining the characteristics of philosophy – in general, but also of his own philosophical system – is something that Badiou commences with the publication of *Being and Event* (1988). In the following I will therefore concentrate mainly on texts written after (or around the same time as) *Being and Event*.

### The Metaphysics of Finitude

On more than one occasion Badiou (N 65; B 23; TC 166) has emphasized his firm fidelity to the Nietzschean announcement of the 'death of God' as the distinctive mark of, and program for, modernity.<sup>92</sup> To Badiou, this announcement is first of all an ontological statement.<sup>93</sup> It represents the conviction that being qua being should no longer be thought in terms of totality, whether with reference to the God of monotheism or the Man of 20<sup>th</sup> century humanism or any other term taking the place of God. "We can", as Badiou explains in a conversation with Simon Critchley, "understand the death of God as the ontological death of the One, of the transcendence of the One."<sup>94</sup> Or as he puts it in his book on number-theory *Number and Numbers* from 1990: "Modernity is defined by the fact that the One is not [...]. So, for we moderns (or 'free spirits'), the Multiple-without-One is the

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<sup>91</sup> There is nothing extraordinary about this approach. Similar or related approaches can be found in the work of countless scholars exploring thinkers or philosopher, who has written on religion and theology, but in implicit, fragmented or disorderly ways. However, my main source of inspiration is Jeremy R. Carrette's study *Foucault and Religion* (Carrette 2000).

<sup>92</sup> See also Badiou, "Being by Numbers," 86; Badiou, "A Conversation with Alain Badiou," 100. Badiou (B 21-32) offers a detailed and original account of his conception of the formula 'God is dead' in the prologue to *Briefings on Existence*. I will return to this issue.

<sup>93</sup> Following the long tradition from Aristotle to Heidegger, Badiou (BE 13; B 43) defines ontology as 'the discourse on, or what can be said of, being qua being.'

<sup>94</sup> Badiou, "Ours is not a terrible situation."

last word on being qua being” (N 65). In the first dense meditation of *Being and Event*, Badiou (BE 23) qualifies this declaration of the non-existence of the One further by clarifying that this claim is “[...] not a question [...] of abandoning the principle Lacan assigned to the symbolic; that *there is* Oneness.” Rather, Badiou’s (BE 24) claim is, as he explains, that the one, that every unity, is merely the result of an operation, more precisely a ‘counting as one’ operation, and thus not an intrinsic characteristic of being. In Badiou’s wording: “[...] there is no one, only the count-as-one.”<sup>95</sup>

However, as Badiou (BE 24) points out, since every one, every unity, is a result of a counting operation, it entails that the material upon which this operation operates must itself be not one. Thinking the one as a result of a counting operation thus implies that what is counted or presented as one, what is unified, is itself without one, without limit or boundary, or in other words, infinitely multiple. If the One is not, if it is merely the result of an operation, as Badiou (TW 39) says, then this implies that being qua being is nothing but multiples of multiples, and so on. To the question of whether there is not some kind of an end point to this sequence of multiplicities, Badiou’s answer is: Yes there is an end point, but not in terms of some-thing other than a multiplicity, since that would precisely be to reintroduce the One. Instead he argues that: “The end point is of necessity also a multiplicity. The multiplicity which is the multiplicity of no multiplicity at all, the thing is also no-thing: the void, the empty multiplicity, the empty set.”<sup>96</sup> In other words, thinking being in this way, as multiplicities of multiplicities, requires, as Badiou (BE 29) emphasizes, that there can be no substantial definition of the concept of multiplicity. According to Badiou (BE 29-30, 43; cf. NN 65) this is exactly what modern axiomatic set theory accomplishes; and it does so by asserting as its only existential quantifier precisely the axiom of the empty set or the void.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> This operation of count-as-one is as Badiou (B 134) has suggested to a certain extent comparable with Kant’s notion of ‘original apperception’: “If the subjective connotation of original apperception is left aside, conceived as it was by Kant as the ‘transcendental unity of self-consciousness’, and if we set out sight on the operation per se, what I call counting-as-one would be recognized effortlessly.”

<sup>96</sup> Badiou, “Towards a New Concept of Existence,” 65-66 (cf. TW 39).

<sup>97</sup> Badiou unfolds this argument in detail in meditation 2-5 in *Being and Event*.

To think being in the way just described, means to effectuate ‘the ontological death of the One’, to ‘liberate the infinite from its theological conception’ (IT 183). Or as Badiou (C 110) states in his 1992 essay-collection, *Conditions*: “By inaugurating a thinking in which the infinite is irreversibly separated from every instance of the One, mathematics has in its own field successfully accomplished the program of the death of God.” And so, in Badiou’s (B 23) opinion, both God and religion are (or rather ought to be) definitively finished.

But, as he admits, although mathematics has shown the way for this program of modernity, this effectuation of the death of God, a task that he also refers to as ‘the secularization of the infinite’ (NN 45; C 111; B 124) has nevertheless not yet been fully realized.<sup>98</sup> We are not yet ‘absolutely modern’, something still remains of God and religion today, and so the One is preserved. This is the case primarily through the contemporary celebration of what Badiou (B29; NN 36, 86; C 99) refers to as ‘the theme of finitude.’ This might seem counterintuitive at first sight, since the advocacy of finitude is usually associated with materialism or even atheism. Is not the very result of the proclamation of the death of God the invalidation of any claim to immortality and the acknowledgment of the sole finite character of our existence? Yes, but according to Badiou (B 29; TW 28) this assertion is, as we shall see, exactly the reproduction of religion. Badiou (LW 535) localizes the origin of the theme finitude, which undoubtedly has had a huge influence on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century continental philosophy (not least on Heidegger), in Kant’s critical philosophy:

Kant is the inventor of the disastrous theme of our ‘finitude’. The solemn and sanctimonious declaration that we can have no knowledge of this or that always foreshadows some obscure devotion to the Master of the unknowable, the God of the religions or the placeholders: Being, Meaning, Life...<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> The ‘secularization of the infinite’ or ‘liberation of the infinite from its theological conception’ is Badiou’s way of describing Georg Cantor’s realization and pluralisation of the actual infinite.

<sup>99</sup> Let me, for the sake of nuance, just mention Emmanuel Lévinas’ (2000, 59) critical comment on Heidegger (1962, 31; 47), who in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* also emphasizes the importance of finitude in Kant’s philosophy: “Kantian philosophy was reduced by Heidegger [...] to the first radical exhibition of the finitude of being.” In contrast to Heidegger (and Badiou) Lévinas (2000, 59) emphasizes that Kant, in his moral philosophy, “[...] go father, and anyway elsewhere, than toward finitude.”

This ‘religious’ theme of finitude is a recurring concern in Badiou’s writings from the beginning of the 1990s onwards, in which he not only attacks the epistemological dimension, but also the moral(ist) dimension of the claim of our finitude. He thus criticizes it in many different domains – not just in philosophy, but also in art, ethics, politics and in his latest ‘big book’, *Logics of Worlds*, as the essence of today’s predominant ideology – and he does so under a range of different headings such as ‘Romanticism’ (C 93-112; H 1-15; TC 152-60), ‘ethical nihilism’ (E 18-39), ‘animal humanism’ (TC 165-178), and ‘democratic materialism’ (LW 1-9). Due to the wide scale of this critique I think it is not only justifiable, but more adequate to talk, not just about the *theme* of finitude, but also of the *metaphysics* of finitude. Moreover, the function of the theme of finitude, as Badiou (TW 42) understands it, fits exactly his critical definition of metaphysics as “[...] the commandeering of being by the one.”<sup>100</sup> So, what do I mean by ‘the metaphysics of finitude’? And why, more precisely, is this metaphysics, in Badiou’s view, religious?

The best way to start answering the first question is perhaps by quoting a quite long passage from *The Odd One In*, a book by the Slovenian philosopher, Alenka Zupančič (2008b, 48), from whom I have borrowed the expression ‘the metaphysics of

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Even more relevantly, Žižek has raised an explicit reservation against Badiou’s understanding of this issue. Although Žižek (PV 110) do agree with Badiou on the need for a critique of ‘finitude’ in the sense that Badiou takes this term, it is also obvious from Žižek’s reading of Kant that he does not think that Badiou’s understanding applies to the Kantian conception of finitude. Moreover, Žižek even claims that Badiou’s himself needs a Kantian conception of finitude to make his philosophy coherent (Žižek, “On Divine Self-Limitation and Revolutionary Love,” 33). In Žižek’s reading, the Kantian conception of finitude cannot be reduced to the claim that ‘we are finite beings with finite knowledge’. Quite on the contrary, according to Žižek (PV 21-22; cf. TTS 163-164), the Kantian conception of finitude does not, to put it simply, privilege the finite or mortal dimension of life over the infinite dimension; rather it introduced a third domain, which Žižek likes to describe through a term he borrows from horror-fiction, namely the ‘undead’ (a term that Žižek tends to use synonymously with the Freudian notion of ‘death drive’).

<sup>100</sup> Badiou (TW 43) explicitly aligns this critical definition of metaphysics with onto-theology, which he, as he makes clear in the abovementioned conversation with Critchley, understands in the Heideggerian sense that ‘the question of being is always also the question of the One’; or in Heidegger’s (2002, 54) words: “[...] the question of being as such *and* as a whole.”

finitude', and in which she offers the following immediate and general characterization of this expression:

For quite some time, a lot of critical philosophical work has been dedicated to various ways of undermining the metaphysics of infinity, and of transcendence. Yet we should not overlook the fact that there is also a considerable (modern) corpus of what I would call a *metaphysics of finitude* in which, often with a distinctively pathetic ring to it, finitude appears as *our* (contemporary) great narrative. The range of this metaphysics of finitude is considerable; it stretches from very complex and highly elaborate philosophical enterprises to an utterly commonsense 'psycho-theology of everyday life' (to borrow, with different signifying implications, Eric Santner's expression), in which finitude appears as consolation for, and explanation of, our little (or not so little) disappointments and misfortunes, as a new Master-Signifier summoned to make sense of our ('acknowledged') senseless existence, as a new Gospel or 'good news': You're only human! Give yourself a break! Nobody's perfect!<sup>101</sup>

This quotation in no way captures the full complexity that the theme of finitude assumes in Badiou's exposition. However, it hints at two of the issues, that I will elaborate on in the following, namely the kind of morality that the metaphysics of finitude implies, and the intimate link between finitude, sense (or meaning) and religion. Moreover Zupančič's description illustrates and emphasizes the 'considerable range' this metaphysics of finitude has. It has, as Zupančič says, referring to Lyotard's celebrated expression, the scale of a 'great narrative', which suggests that its critique (in this case Badiou's critique) is not only a critique of a philosophical, or to be more precise a religious, metaphysics; it can also be conceived as a sort of cultural critique.

### *Finitude and Limit*

Now, let's take a closer look of some of the characteristics of the metaphysics of finitude as they appear throughout Badiou's

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<sup>101</sup> Zupančič (2008b, 52) does not explicitly state, that her account of the finitude of metaphysic is inspired by Badiou, but he is mentioned a couple of times throughout the book, among other places, precisely during the analysis of finitude of metaphysic. Furthermore, Badiou has been a strong inspiration and interlocutor in Zupančič's two previous book *The Ethics of the Real* (2000) and *The Shortest Shadow* (2003). And maybe the inspiration also goes the other way; thus *The Ethics of the Real* is mentioned by Badiou (LW 537) in the appendix of *Logics of Worlds*.

critique. As I have just suggested, Badiou criticizes (at least) two dimensions of the metaphysics of finitude: an epistemological and a moral dimension.

In terms of epistemology, the argument implied by the metaphysics of finitude goes something like this: Against any metaphysical megalomania, we should humbly acknowledge our finitude as our ultimate horizon and accept that there is no Absolute Truth, that there is no way out of the prison-house of language and interpretation, that all we can do is to accept the contingency and historicity of our knowledge, our lack of any absolute point of reference. This point is perfectly summarized in the following passage by Nietzsche (2002, 13): “Everything has become: there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths. Consequently what is needed from now on is historical philosophizing, and with it the virtue of modesty.” However, the consequence of this apparently atheist point of view, is quite surprising. Whereas the objective of classic, pre-critical (theological) metaphysics was to obtain knowledge of the Absolute, today, as Žižek (MC 242) explains, “[...] the religious dimension is explicitly linked to the limitation of our comprehension, i.e., this dimension is not the intimation of a ‘higher’ knowledge, but the inverted assertion of its limitation.” This is why, these days, atheists are no longer despised in the field of theology, on the contrary, it is frequently emphasized how the ‘post-metaphysical’, ‘deconstructive’ atheism from Nietzsche to Derrida, in its ‘leave-taking’ with the ‘God of the philosophers’, is actually much closer to the ‘true’ God of the Judea-Christian tradition than the absolutist theism of classical metaphysics. Or in the words of one of the most important theological inspirations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: “The god-less thinking, which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God” (Heidegger 2002, 72). The consequence of this is, as Žižek (MC 255) points out, that: “[...] even Nietzsche, the fiercest critic of Christianity, can be enlisted to support the postmodern ‘theological turn.’”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Žižek is here referring to the book *After the Death of God* by John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo. The ill-concealed critique in the above remark is summarized elsewhere by Žižek (CWZ 162) in the following way: “[...] I am very much opposed to the recent post-secular theological turn of deconstruction; the idea being that while there is no ontotheological God there is nonetheless some kind of unconditional ethical injunction up to which one cannot live.” Though it is not said in the same explicit terms in Badiou’s case, he definitely shares Žižek’s critique. In a certain sense on

Ironically, this new religious dimension or space that characterizes modernity was created by the very delimitation of religion from the realm of knowledge (reason) enforced by Enlightenment philosophy through its radical critique of religion, i.e. the dismissal of ‘the ontological argument’ and thus of rational knowledge of the Absolute. By rigidly dividing religion from the realm of reason, expelling it to the domain of morality and feelings, enlightenment philosophy did not finally purify knowledge of faith; it merely transposed the gap between faith and knowledge into the field of knowledge (reason) itself. This paradoxical development is brilliantly analysed by the young Hegel (1977, 55-56) in *Faith and knowledge*:

After its battle with religion the best that Reason could manage was to take a look at itself and come to self-awareness. Reason, having in this way become mere intellect, acknowledges its own nothingness by placing that which is better than it in a *faith outside and above* itself, as a *beyond* to be believed in.<sup>103</sup>

And as Žižek (MC 58) emphasizes in a comment on Hegel’s analysis: “The epitome of this development is Kant’s philosophy: Kant started as the great destroyer, with his ruthless critique of theology, and ended up with – as he himself put it – constraining the scope of Reason to create a space for faith.” In the end, philosophy has thus in Hegel’s (1977, 56) words “[...] made itself the handmaid of a faith once more.” In stark opposition to this Badiou stresses that: “Against Kant, we have to maintain that we know being qua being [...].”<sup>104</sup>

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can say that Badiou’s critique of finitude is exactly a critique of this sort of post-secular religiosity, since the latter is based on idea that it is through the ‘fundamental finitude of our existence’ that we are confronted with the ‘radical otherness’ or ‘infinite demand’. Hallward (2001a, xxi-xxx) indicates something along these lines in his critical discussion of Lévinas and Derrida in his introduction to the English translation of Badiou’s *Ethics*.

<sup>103</sup> More recently a criticism similar to Hegel’s has been proposed by Badiou’s student, Quentin Meillassoux (2008, 46), who in his book, *After finitude*, argues that: “The destruction of the metaphysical rationalization of Christian theology has resulted in a generalized becoming-religious of thought, viz. in *fideism of any belief of whatsoever*.”

<sup>104</sup> Badiou, “Towards a New Concept of Existence,” 67. Or as Badiou (LW 8) puts it, describing his ‘materialist dialectic’ position, in *Logics of Worlds*: “To have done, if possible, with the watered-down Kant of limits, rights and unknowables. To affirm, with Mao Tse-tung (why not?): ‘We will come to



When it comes to the moral attitude implied by the theme of finitude, the chief imperative is once again: Be modest! That is, in short, that we should accept the fact that we are only human, acknowledge our frail, soiled body, with all its weakness' and defects, our failures and limitations, admit the fragility of our existence and accept what we can neither master nor be the Masters of everything in our own lives or in nature. To argue in this way, that man's most defining characteristic is his finitude, his 'being-towards-death', is in Badiou's view the same as claiming that essentially man is nothing but a (potential) victim (E 10-11), that in the end 'man is just a pitiable animal' (TC 175), or as he puts it in his short book on ethics "[...] the underlying conviction is that the only thing that can really happen to someone is death" (E 35). It is on basis of such a conception of man that what Badiou (E 13) terms the 'contemporary ideology of ethics' is able to undermine in advance every idea of betterment, every 'positive' project to unite people, on grounds that it will probably just result in an even greater evil.<sup>105</sup> Against this conviction Badiou insists that something else can indeed happen to us other than death, namely that we at one point or even at several points in our lifetime are granted the chance to become subjects to a truth.<sup>106</sup>

What unites the epistemological and the moral dimension of the metaphysics of finitude, however, is the reference to limits

know everything that we did not know before'." See also the chapter on Kant in *Briefings on Existence* (B 163).

<sup>105</sup> This stance is in Badiou's (E 8) view grounded in Kant's moral philosophy. For quite another reading of Kant's ethics, which is in fact very much in line with Badiou's own conception of ethics, see Zupančič's (2000) *The Ethics of the Real* and appendix III in Žižek's (PF 273-310) *The Plague of Fantasies*. See also Hallward's (2001a, xix-xxi) comments on similarities between Badiou's and Kant's ethics in his introduction to Badiou's *Ethics*.

<sup>106</sup> Surprisingly to some and to the great irritation of others, Badiou, as it is well known, tends to use the arch-Pauline word 'grace' as a metaphor for this. Recently he has even been so bold as to quote (or rather paraphrase) Paul on this issue: "[...] we must ask with Paul: 'Death, where is thy victory?'" (Badiou, "Towards a New Concept of Existence," 72). Of course Badiou still maintains that he uses the metaphor of grace in completely 'laicised' way purely to describe "[...] the fact that, to the degree that we are given a chance of truth, a chance of being a little bit more than living individuals, pursuing our ordinary interest, this chance is always given to us through an event." (Badiou, "Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou," 124).

and limitations. The theme of finitude introduces – to put it simply – a limit, not only on our existence, but also on what we can know, what we can do and what we can hope for. Badiou finds this extremely problematic, because by limiting our existence in this way being is retied to the One. Or in other words, the very transcendence that is refused by insisting on the merely finite character of our existence, by emphasizing our finitude, is reintroduced as an ‘immanent transcendence’ in terms of the bodily, existential and epistemological limitations of this finitude. At the heart of this matter is thus the question of how we should define the finite, the infinite and the relationship between them.

According to Badiou (LW 535), the base of the theme of finitude is, as already mentioned, Kantian. In so far as the infinite in the critical-transcendental apparatus of Kant’s philosophy is inseparable from the forms of intuition of space and time, it is also always only a ‘potential’ infinite that we can grasp, i.e. infinity as a never fully realized possibility, and never an ‘actual’ infinite. From within the horizon of Kantian transcendental-epistemological finitude the infinite can only be understood as a perpetually postponed possibility in the future.<sup>107</sup> Or, as Adrian Johnston (2007b, 148) puts it: “Kant indeed conceives of the infinite as a separate transcendence from which the finite is permanently barred. Kantian infinity ‘exists’ only in fictions of a future forever just beyond the visible horizon.” In this way, the infinite is only present as always absent or precisely as a limit or limitation constituted by our finitude, whereas the essence of Badiou’s ontology is exactly that infinity is always-already here, nothing (literally) limits it.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Summarizing Adrian W. Moore’s (2002, 84-93) exposition in his book *The Infinite* of Kant’s perception of the infinite, we can say, that while Kant considers the a priori forms of time and space to be infinite, the idea of infinity cannot be applied to the physical universe. However, it still has a legitimate ‘regulative use’ in relation to the latter. That is, it is possible to proceed *as if* the physical universe were infinite, or *as if* we could progress endless from a lower toward a higher stage of moral perfection. In short, Kant’s position, and the relevant consequence of it in relation to the present discussion, is thus, in Hallward’s (2003, 165) words, that: “Kant [...] subordinates ontology to epistemology (and in doing so, confirms the foreclosure of an actually infinite reality as such).”

<sup>108</sup> As far as I know there is no explicit discussion of Kant’s conception of the infinite in Badiou’s work, only the following remark in *Logics of Worlds*: “In particular, his [Kant’s] conception of the infinite and consequently of quantitative evaluations is outmoded” (LW 235). Though

The limit displaces the infinite to a transcendent Beyond, but as Badiou (E 25) states in his book on ethics: “The infinite [...] is the banal reality of every situation, not the predicate of a transcendence.” And thus, in Badiou’s (C 97) view, the relationship between the finite and the infinite should not be thought of in terms of a limit, at least not in terms of a horizontal conceptualization of the limit.<sup>109</sup> When it comes to the emphasis between the finite and the infinite, one could say that Badiou (NN 85-86) on a certain level reverses the Kantian scheme, reverses the priority of finitude, claiming that:

Modern thought says that the first situation, the banal situation, is the infinite. The finite is a secondary situation, very special, very singular, extremely rare. The obsession with ‘finitude’ is a remnant of the tyranny of the sacred. The ‘death of God’ does not deliver us to finitude, but to the omnipresent infinitude of situations, and, correlatively, to the infinity of the thinkable.

To be able to rid itself of the theme of finitude and to ultimately effectuate the death of God, it is thus crucial, in Badiou’s mind, that philosophy detaches itself from the Kantian heritage, from the perpetual examination of limits (IT 122; LW 8).

As we have seen in the above, Badiou (LW 71) not only violently rejects anything with the slightest connection to the theme of finitude, accusing any thought based on this theme of reducing man to a ‘pitiable’ mortal animal, he opposes this claim of our solely finite existence with the claim that we can become ‘subjects to an infinite truth’ and in doing so the “[...] we of human species have the power to be immortal.” However, this leaves us with the following very reasonable critical question: Is this rejection by Badiou of what seems to be a materialist insistence on our merely finite, biological and mortal existence in favour of lofty assertions of ‘the grace of an event’, of ‘infinite truths’ and of ‘immortal subjects’ not exactly a return to some kind of idealism, an ill-concealed humanistic or even religious idealism? However, when explicitly confronted in an interview with the charge of idealism Badiou immediately

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Badiou is predominately critical towards Kant (and Kantianism) there are definitely also a certain affinity towards some aspects of Kant’s ontology and also some similarities in terms of ethics (see Hallward 2003, 163-168, 266-67).

<sup>109</sup> Badiou (C 97) opposes the (post-Kantian) conception of the limit as a horizon with a mathematical conception of the limit as a ‘present-point’.

retorted: “Actually, I would submit that my system is the most rigorously materialist in ambition that we’ve seen since Lucretius.”<sup>110</sup> And he indeed stages his rejection of the materialism of finitude, not as a confrontation between materialism and idealism, but rather as the confrontation between two brands of materialism. These are portrayed in the preface of *Logics of Worlds* respectively as the predominate ‘democratic materialism’, summarized by the assertion that ‘there are only bodies and languages’, and Badiou’s (LW 1-9) alternative ‘materialist dialectic’, summarized in the counter-assertion that ‘there are only bodies and languages, except that there are also truths’.<sup>111</sup> But, Badiou’s manoeuvre could also be described, as Žižek (MC 92) has explained, in the following way:

Here Badiou performs the paradoxical philosophical gesture of defending, as a materialist, the autonomy of the ‘immaterial’ order of the event. As a materialist, and in order to be thoroughly materialist, Badiou focuses on the idealist topos *par excellence*: How can a human animal forsake its animality and put its life at the service of a transcendent Truth? How can the ‘transubstantiation’ from the pleasure-oriented life of an *individual* to the life of a *subject* dedicated to a Cause occur? In other words, how is a free act possible? How can one break (out of) the network of the causal connections of positive reality and conceive an act that begins by and in itself? In short, Badiou *repeats within the materialist frame the elementary gesture of idealist anti-reductionism*. Human Reason cannot be reduced to the result of evolutionary adaptation; art is not just a heightened procedure of providing sensual pleasures, but a medium of Truth; and so on.

I will leave the critical questions of how, more precisely, Badiou does this (i.e. repeats in a materialist manner the gesture of idealist anti-reductionism) and to which degree he can be said to succeed in his enterprise, open for the time being. However, I

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<sup>110</sup> Badiou, “Being by numbers,” 123. Very strong charges of idealism have also been level against Badiou by Adrian Johnston (2008a) in his article “What Matter(s) in Ontology: Alain Badiou, the Hebb-event and Materialism split from within.”

<sup>111</sup> Badiou presents his position of ‘materialist dialectics’ with a explicit reference to Louis Althusser and it can be argued that not only *Logics of Worlds*, but the whole of Badiou’s philosophy as such, is an attempt to renew the tradition of dialectical materialism, who’s latest great advocate was precisely Althusser (Bosteels, 2001; 2002).

will return to these questions at length in the following two chapters.

### **Religion = Meaning**

Now let me return to our second question: Why is the metaphysics of finitude religious? The short answer is (as implied in the above): Because the insistence on our finitude, our limited finite existence, reties being to the One and thus cancels the death of God. However, I think it is about time that we take a closer look at Badiou's definition of religion and how this definition more precisely relates to the tethering of being to the One, which, as should be clear by now, is the 'religious' operation par excellence in Badiou's book. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Badiou (C 24, 13-14; D 38; OB 57; TC 78-79; PP 67) does, at least in his later work, have a fairly consistent definition of religion, namely the following: "I propose to call 'religion' everything that presupposes that there is a continuity between truths and the circulation of meaning." Let us try to unfold this definition a little further. When Badiou describes the relation between truth and meaning in religion as a 'continuity', what he means is that religion equates these two terms, or in other words, reduces the one to the other. As he declares elsewhere: "[...] the imperative of religion [is] to affirm that, on one point at least, sense<sup>112</sup> and truth are indistinguishable."<sup>113</sup> As we know from the previous chapter, if there is to be a truth, in Badiou's terms, something must happen; a truth is always brought about by an event, it is something that we do when something happens to us. In this perspective religion is, as Badiou (OB 57) points out in his book on Beckett, "[...] the desire to give meaning to everything that happens." Contrary to

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<sup>112</sup> The French noun used by Badiou when he relates religion to meaning is 'sens'. There is no consensus among Badiou's English-translators about the translation of this word, which in English can be (and indeed is) translated into both 'sense' and 'meaning'.

<sup>113</sup> Badiou, "The Formulas of *l'Etourdit*," 85. In a comment on Badiou's definition of religion Žižek (PV 182) poses the following, for the present context, very relevant question: "The key question about religion today is: can all religious experiences and practices be contained within this dimension of the conjunction of truth and meaning? Does not Judaism, with its imposition of a traumatic Law, adumbrate a dimension of truth outside meaning [...]? And, at a different level, does not the same go for Saint Paul himself?" I will return to this question in chapter five in my discussion of Žižek's 'materialist theology'.

this, in philosophy the relationship between truth and meaning is a ‘face to face’ relationship, a relationship of opposition or confrontation in which philosophy ‘subtracts’ the truths produced in the domains of art, science politics and love, distinguishing or ‘separating them from the law of the world’, and thus ‘making holes in meaning’ (C 24).

By defining religion in this manner, that is, by referring (in fact merging) it to the concept of meaning, Badiou (C 136; TC 79; LW 387) once again takes his lead from Lacan. Indeed, he explicitly points out the particular text in the Lacanian oeuvre that serves as the source of inspiration for this definition of religion. Or, in Badiou’s (LW 553) own words: “The text of Lacan from which I draw the equation religion = meaning is none other than the letter in which he announced, in January 1980, the dissolution of the École Française de Psychoanalyse [...]” Therefore, a short detour into Lacan’s thoughts on religion might serve as a helpful background to Badiou’s critical engagement with religion, but also as an opportunity to raise one or two critical questions.

When it comes to religion, the premise or starting point of Lacan is, like in virtually all other matters, Sigmund Freud. In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud (1961a, 18) famously argues that religion serves as defence-mechanism against the threefold cause of human suffering: ‘the terrors of nature, the cruelty of fate and the privations of culture’. Religion is, as he puts it in *Civilization and its Discontents*, an “[...] attempt to procure a certainty of happiness and a protection against suffering by a delusional remoulding of reality [...]” (Freud 1961b, 81). On the whole Lacan affirms this picture of religion as a form of consolation in so far that it ‘consists in avoiding the emptiness’ at the centre of existence (Lacan 1992, 160) and (self-)delusion in so far that it ‘negates truth as the cause of the subject’ (Lacan 2007, 741).<sup>114</sup>

However, there are of course also differences on this matter, and a crucial point on which Lacan differs from Freud is on the question of the future prospects for religion. Freud (1961a, 56)

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<sup>114</sup> On critique of religion in Freud and Lacan, see Alexandre Leupin (2004, 105-123) and James DiCenso (1999, 30-49). My account of religion here in the work of Freud and Lacan is by necessity somewhat simplistic and rather one-sided. Recently, several new interesting studies have convincingly shown that Judeo-Christian theology and religion is not only criticised, but plays a much more ambivalent and indeed constructive role in both Freud and Lacan (Santner 2001; Reinhard & Lupton 2003; Pound 2007). However, this is not the place to engage further in this discussion.

basically shares the confidence of the Enlightenment in rational progress and trusts that, at some point in the future, science and psychoanalysis (being scientific in Freud's view) will replace religion. Lacan is, to say the least, less optimistic. As he dramatically proclaims in a famed interview he gave at a conference in Rome in 1974: "Psychoanalysis will not triumph over religion. Religion is inextinguishable. Psychoanalysis will never triumph over it - it will either survive or not survive."<sup>115</sup> So, why does Lacan believe that religion is inextinguishable? The answer is given in the same interview: "Religion", he says, "can make sense of anything, no matter what, out of human life for example. [...] From the beginning 'religious' meant making sense out of formerly natural things."<sup>116</sup> By virtue of its power to give meaning to life and to everything that happens to us in life religion will not be defeated easily, and least of all by science, whose introduction of 'countless absolutely earth-shattering things into people's lives', in Lacan's perspective, might very well end up benefiting rather than eliminating religion.<sup>117</sup> As a way of creating continuity, consistency and unity out of the things that shatter our lives, the concept of *meaning* is for Lacan not only the religious concept par excellence, but also in bleak contrast to two of the most essential concepts of psychoanalysis, namely the Freudian 'unconscious' and Lacanian 'real'.

It is from this perspective that we should read Lacan's (1977, 7-8) warning in the beginning of *Seminar XI* not to confuse the hermeneutic demand to 'seek the ever new and never exhausted

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<sup>115</sup> Lacan, "Press Conference by Doctor Jacques Lacan at the French Cultural Center." On the different perceptions of the relations between psychoanalysis, science and religion in Freud and Lacan, see Jacques-Alain Miller (2004).

<sup>116</sup> Lacan, "Press Conference by Doctor Jacques Lacan at the French Cultural Center." On this connection between religion and meaning, see also Lacan (1977, 7-8; 1980a, 9-10; 1980b, 17-20).

<sup>117</sup> Lacan, "Press Conference by Doctor Jacques Lacan at the French Cultural Center." In his essay *Religion, Psychoanalysis* Jacques-Alain Miller (2004, 18-19) instructively elaborates on this point in the following way: "After having given its laws, science has allowed itself to act, to master, and to possess—as Descartes said, "to be and to have." In this production it has damaged nature. This has given birth to many movements, including social and political. [...] This is also what gives a future to religion through meaning, namely by erecting barriers—to cloning, to the exploitation of human cells—and to inscribe science in a tempered progress. We see a marvellous effort, a new youthful vigour of religion in its effort to flood the real with meaning."

signification with what psychoanalysis calls interpretation'. In contrast to the hermeneutic *search* for *meaning*, which Lacan explicitly associates with 'the religious register' on the same pages, psychoanalytical interpretation aims at creating a truth. This is a property that psychoanalysis shares with science and thus an important point at which it can be distinguished from religion (Fink 1995, 57-58). One obviously detects here a strong source of inspiration for Badiou's critical opposition, outlined in the previous chapter, to the hermeneutic strand in philosophy. This stark opposition between (a religious and hermeneutical) operation of meaning and a senseless truth, which Badiou (TC 78-79) sees as prefigured in Freud and systematically developed in Lacan, is the key distinction that Badiou's employs to critically separate himself from religion. Or as he puts in relation to Lacan: "It is certainly thanks to Lacan's implacable knife, to the sure way he sliced between the logic of sense and the logic of truth, that we have the whole conceptual apparatus in which the abjection of pious discourse was made perceptible" (C 136).

### *Religion and Science*

Although Badiou is thus most certainly inspired by Lacan in his view, indeed critique, of religion, there are at least two important issues on which Badiou disagrees with Lacan on this matter and actually seems to be much closer to Freud. Namely on the question of the future of religion and on the question of the relationship between religion and science, which is in Badiou's case (basically), mathematics. Another essential issue on which Badiou disagrees with Lacan is on the status and possible future of philosophy. This disagreement is, as we shall see, not without relevance to our context. When it comes to the notorious issue of the relationship between religion and science, Badiou's position is, just like Freud's, good old-fashioned enlightenment rationalism. Science, or to be exact the science of mathematics, which is the only true rational science in Badiou's eyes,<sup>118</sup> is the sole bulwark against all kinds of superstition, obscurantism and spirituality (TW 16-17, 27). And on the offensive side, Badiou

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<sup>118</sup> This seems, at best, to be a rather strange claim. But Badiou is indeed infamous for his polemical statements on the natural sciences, especially biology, which he simply describes as "[...] that wild empiricism disguised as science [...]" (TW 17). For a critical discussion of Badiou's understanding the natural sciences, see Brassier (2005) and Johnston (2008a).



sees mathematics as the most effective weapon against religion, the means by which the death of God must be effectuated. Why? Because: “[...] mathematics teaches us that there is no reason whatsoever to confine thinking within the ambit of finitude” (TW 19). More precisely, since the mathematics of set theory was invented by Georg Cantor at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has invited us to think infinity separately from its millenary theological collusion with the One (B 30), that is, to think that it exists in a wholly banal sense in the form of a number (NN 82). Or, in the words of Badiou (B 124): “That the infinite is a number is what a set-theoretic ontology of the manifold finally made possible after centuries of denial and enclosure of the infinite within theology’s vocation. This is why the ontology of number is an important item in the secularization of the infinite. Indeed, it is the only way to be freed from both religion and the romantic motif of finitude.” So, to put it bluntly, in Badiou’s view, aided by mathematical set theory, the time has come to finish off religion; the future prospects of religion do not look too bright, which brings us to the next issue.

Although he was not under any illusion that it was likely to happen within the foreseeable future, Freud’s (1961a, 56) viewpoint was nevertheless that at some point in the course of human history science would inevitably prevail over and replace religion. If we take Badiou’s words at face value, he seems to agree with Freud, contrary to Lacan, that religion really has no future. Indeed, this (no) future has already been inaugurated: “Our times are undoubtedly those of the disappearance of the gods without return” (B 30). Badiou (B 23) openly admits this divergence between Lacan and himself: “Lacan [...] can certainly not be suspected of clerical complacency. Yet he contended that it is strictly impossible to finish up with religion once and for all. Now, my conviction on this matter is the opposite. I take the formula ‘God is dead’ literally.”<sup>119</sup> So, how does Badiou imagine that we ‘finish up with religion once and for all’?

Badiou briefly touches upon this question in the preface to *Briefings on Existence*. Here Badiou very neatly distinguishes between three different perceptions of God: The encountered God of religion, the conceptual God of metaphysics and the

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<sup>119</sup> On Badiou’s stance on the future prospects of religion, see also *The Century* (TC 166) and Badiou, “A Conversation with Alain Badiou.”

absent God of poetry.<sup>120</sup> At the end of this text Badiou also gives some hints as to how he imagines that these three different perceptions of God are abrogated. To finish with the encountered God of religion, which Badiou sees as having been dead for a while, because God cannot really be encountered anymore, is a political problem. “The problem” Badiou (B 30-31) says “is to ward off the disastrous effects wrought by any obscure subjectivation of this death [of God].” As to the annulment of the God of metaphysics, Badiou’s (B 31) answer is that to achieve this “[...] thought must accomplish its course in the infinite.” This is, as Badiou also likes to phrase it, the task of ‘secularizing the infinite’ through an ontology of mathematical set theory. Concerning the abolishment of the third God, the God of the poets, this is the business of poetry itself. Poetry “[...] must cleanse language from within by slicing of the agency of loss and return. That is because we have lost nothing and nothing returns” (B 31). According to Badiou (MP 77) this task has partly been commenced within the poetry of Paul Celan. In Badiou’s view, a contemporary atheism is thus what breaks with all of these three notions of Gods, and especially with the notion of God sustained by the theme of our finitude.

Let me end this detour on Lacan’s thoughts on religion with a brief comment on the question of the future of philosophy in Lacan and Badiou. Badiou has written extensively on Lacan and at the centre of this engagement is the question of the relationship between Lacan, and more generally psychoanalysis, and philosophy. In a text on Lacan’s ‘antiphilosophy’, Badiou (C 228-229) outlines Lacan’s view on this relationship in the following way: “Psychoanalysis also has to provide a basis on which to judge philosophy in the illusions it propagates, illusions that in Lacan’s eyes appeared unlikely to have a brilliant future ahead of them, and in any case a much less certain one than the illusions of the religious, which, for structural reasons, he held to be infinitely more tenacious.” What Badiou is referring to here is perhaps the following harsh comment on the future of philosophy stated by Lacan (1980b, 17) in a small piece he wrote just before his death: “*I rise up in revolt*, so to speak, against philosophy. What is sure is that it is something finite and done

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<sup>120</sup> I will return to this text and Badiou’s distinction between these three perceptions of God in the following sections as I engage in Badiou’s polemics against ‘Romanticism’ and his critique of Heidegger’s ‘poetic suturing of philosophy’.

with. Even if I expect some rejects to grow out of it. Such regrowths are common enough with finite things.”<sup>121</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter and in stark contrast to what Lacan asserts in this quotation, philosophy is in Badiou’s opinion, in no way coming to an end. Actually, the most important impetus in Badiou’s philosophy since *Being and Event* is perhaps to have done with any idea that philosophy as such isn’t possible anymore. So, Badiou ‘retaliates’ not only by stamping Lacan as an ‘antiphilosopher’, but by tying him to the theme of finitude (LW 481; C 136) and thus in the end to the dubiousness of religion.<sup>122</sup> This is done partly through the mediation of Heidegger, who was one of Lacan’s great sources of inspiration, but who, in Badiou’s eyes, is also, along with Kant, the philosopher of finitude par excellence. In short, what Badiou blames Lacan for is his use of the Heideggerian notion of ‘being-towards-death’: “Lacan believes he can also connect the Freudian concept of death drive to Heidegger’s existential analysis, which defines Dasein as being-for-death.”<sup>123</sup> Badiou’s point here is of course that through his embracement of the notion of ‘being-toward-death’ Lacan ends up advocating our limited, finite, ‘only human’ mortal nature, in short our finitude.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> The English translation of Lacan’s text is Bruno Bosteels’ (2008, 157-158), who quotes the same passage in his article “Radical Antiphilosophy.”

<sup>122</sup> I am not capable of judging if this is a fair reading of Lacan, however, it is worth noticing that even one of his greatest disciples, namely Žižek (PV 110), admits that: “Unfortunately, there is also a Lacanian version of the philosophy of finitude [...]”

<sup>123</sup> Badiou, “Lacan and the Pre-socratics,” 14. However, as Žižek (TN 180) points out, there is a shift in the 1960s in Lacan’s use of the notion of death-drive away from this attempt to connect it to Heidegger’s notion of being-towards-death, toward an understanding of it as the ‘undead’ lamella, the indestructible-immortal life that persists beyond death.

<sup>124</sup> Let me note in passing that an important criticism against Badiou has been advanced by Žižek concerning the understanding of the Freudian notion of death-drive, which Badiou (e.g. LW 509) sometimes is a bit too quick to lump together with everything else linked to the theme of death and finitude. What Badiou misses by doing this is, according to Žižek (PV 110): “The proper Freudian paradox that what explodes the constraints of our finitude is the death-drive if self.” (See also Žižek, “Badiou: Notes on an ongoing debate,” 9). What is of particularly importance about this discussion of notion of the death-drive is that Žižek argues that Badiou needs this concept to bridge what otherwise ends up being an insurmountable severance between the (mortal) human animal of being on the one hand and the (immortal) subject of a truth-event on the other. Or to

To conclude this section one could say that in more general terms Badiou's (B23) charge against Lacan is that he, unlike Badiou himself, does not take the formula 'God is dead' literally. No doubt Lacan would plead guilty as charged, precisely because from a Lacanian perspective taking this formula literally would be rather problematic. Let me, as a critical remark to Badiou, briefly propose why. One of Freud's (1961c, 204) well-known points in his critical analysis of the myth of the murder of the primal father is that the father does not lose his sway over his sons just because they kill him, but as a result of his death, ends up turning into a far more powerful divine figure. Against this background Lacan (1977, 59) argues that "[...] the true formula of atheism is not *God is dead* [...] the true formula of atheism is *God is unconscious*." In short, it is only when we realize that God still haunts us even (or maybe especially) after his death, that a genuine atheism is possible. As Žižek (HTRL 93) suggests, Lacan's point is perhaps best illustrated through the following joke: A man is sent to a mental institution, because he believes that he is a grain of seed. The doctor at the mental institution does his best and finally convinces the man that he is not a grain of seed, but a man. And so the man is released. No sooner has he left the hospital than he is back trembling and very scared, claiming that there is a chicken outside the door and he is afraid that it will eat him. "Dear fellow", says his doctor, "you know very well that you are not a grain of seed, but a man". "Of course I know that", the patient replies, "but does the chicken know it?" Zupančič (2008b, 15-16) brilliantly and instructively reformulated this joke in the following way:

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rephrase it, according to Žižek (TTS 160, 163-64), Badiou needs the death-drive to explain what it is about the human animal that makes it susceptible to the event. Eric L. Santner (2005, 112) has proposed a similar criticism: "The 'vital disorganization' inaugurated by a 'truth-event' happens not simply to an animal pursuing its predatory interests but one whose animal life has already been amplified – one might even say disrupted, disorganized – by what Freud referred to as *Triebschicksal* or 'drive destiny'. What Badiou seems to lose sight of here is, in a word, nothing less than the difference between animal instinct and human drive." This critique is somewhat overlapping with Žižek's (TTS 163-164) abovementioned reservation against Badiou's (mis)understanding of the Kantian conception of finitude, which in Žižek's (TTS 66) perspective is precisely the introduction of the same 'undead' or 'inhuman' domain of human existence, that the Freudian notion of 'death-drive' denotes. I will return to and explore this discussion in a greater extent in chapter four on the theories of subjectivity in Žižek and Badiou.

In the enlightened society of, say, revolutionary terror, a man is put in prison because he believes in God. With different measures, but above all by means of an enlightened explanation, he is brought to the knowledge that God does not exist. When dismissed, the man comes running back, and explains how scared he is of being punished by God. Of course he knows that God does not exist, but does God also know that?

Žižek's (HTRL 93) succeeding comment on this joke is that "[...] it is not enough to convince the patient about the unconscious truth of his symptoms, the unconscious itself must be brought to assume this truth." In other words, only when you realize that 'God is unconscious', that God is not just a subjective illusion, which can be dissolved simply by being told or proclaiming that he does not exist, is it possible to approach a true atheist position where it is not only oneself, but also God himself, who knows he is dead. In line with Žižek (PV 352) I am tempted here to ask if not the cry of the Christian God on the cross – 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me' (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46) – is exactly an expression of such a God who has realized his own (imminent) death? That is, a God, to put it the words of G.K. Chesterton (2007, 130), who "[...] seemed for an instant to be an atheist."

### **To Have Done with Romanticism**

Now, let us take a closer look at the most thorough example of Badiou's critique of the metaphysics of finitude, namely his dismissal of romantic philosophy, or what he also calls 'Romanticism'. In short Badiou (TW 26) defines 'Romanticism' as any thinking that determines the infinite as a horizontal correlate for the finite, and he emphasizes that: "Today in particular, what essentially subsists of Romanticism is the theme of finitude."<sup>125</sup> Badiou (TW 27) explicitly stages his critique of Romanticism as a confrontation with religion in general, but also more specifically with the recurrent 'return to religion in philosophy'. Or, in Badiou's (TW 27) own more colourful terms:

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<sup>125</sup> Or as Badiou put it in one of his interviews: "The real romantic heritage--which is still with us today--is the theme of finitude. The idea that an apprehension of the human condition occurs primordially in the understanding of its finitude maintains infinity at a distance that's both evanescent and sacred, and holds it in the vicinity of a vision of being that's still theological." Badiou, "Being by numbers – Lauren Sedofsky talks with Alain Badiou," 86.

That this critique is urgently required is confirmed by the spectacle – also very Romantic – of the increasing collusion between philosophy (or what passes for philosophy) and religions of all kinds, since the collapse of Marxist politics. Can we really be surprised at so-and-so's rabbinical Judaism, or so-and-so's conversion to Islam, or another's thinly veiled Christian devotion, given that everything we hear boils down to this: that we are 'consigned to finitude' and are '*essentially* mortal'?<sup>126</sup>

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, this critique of Romanticism is part of a more comprehensive move by Badiou to re-establish philosophy as such at a time when it has become commonplace to declare its end. And a survey of some aspects of this move is therefore necessary.

### *Badiou's Platonic Gesture*

Badiou's countermove against the prophecy of 'the end of philosophy', perhaps most famously declared by Heidegger,<sup>127</sup> but according to Badiou (MP 27; C 9, 95; D 5; IF 45), a conviction shared by all of the major orientations in contemporary philosophy, is a return to Plato, or the execution of what he describes as a 'Platonic gesture' (MP 96). Obviously, there is also a polemical aspect to this declaration of Platonism.<sup>128</sup> However, as Badiou (C 10) explicitly underlines, his return to Plato is: "Not in order to restore the prescriptive figure from which modernity has wished to subtract itself, but to examine whether there is not *another* Platonic *act* on basis of which the future of our thought must be supported." This 'other Platonic act' has at least three closely connected aspects or elements.<sup>129</sup> The first element is an affirmation that Plato is the

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<sup>126</sup> This quotation also obviously suggests, as I have argued in the previous chapter, that it would be a serious mistake to understand Badiou's book on Paul as part of a return to religion in contemporary philosophy.

<sup>127</sup> See Heidegger's (1993) lecture "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" from 1964.

<sup>128</sup> See, for instance, Badiou, "Plato, dear Plato," 39, Badiou, "Politics and Philosophy– An interview with Alain Badiou," 123 and Badiou, "Being by numbers – Lauren Sedofsky talks with Alain Badiou," 87.

<sup>129</sup> Badiou's engagement with Plato and Platonism has - to a greater or lesser degree - been present in all of his works since *Being and Event*. It is thus a long and complex affair still developing (the title of his seminars at ENS has since 2006 been and still is *Pour aujourd'hui: Platon!*), which I cannot do justice to here. However, to avoid any misunderstandings let me just for the record stress that Badiou's 'Platonic gesture' is of course not a

founding historical and conceptual configuration – and not, as it has become fashionable to claim, the nihilistic forgetting – of a singular mode of thought.<sup>130</sup> The second consists in a double rupture – with the Romanticism which has had a decisive influence on philosophy from Hegel to Heidegger, and with what currently goes by the name of ‘Platonism’. The third aspect involves a parallel extensive rereading of Plato’s metaphysics in terms of a remoulding of the relationship both between philosophy and mathematics and between philosophy and poetry. I will focus mainly on the first part of the second aspect, Badiou’s rupture with Romanticism, which as we shall see, is itself a double rupture. A rupture with the modern disentanglement of philosophy and mathematics, and a rupture with contemporary philosophy’s ‘suture’ to poetry. However, this second aspect cannot be entirely isolated from the two other aspects and some detours into these are thus unavoidable. The framework that Badiou sets up for (and throughout) this threefold gesture forms the (platonic) conception of philosophy that he outlines for the first time and perhaps most systematically in his *Manifesto for Philosophy*. Since this is the conceptual and narrative background of Badiou’s critique of Romanticism, I will have to begin my exposition of the latter with a review of this conception of philosophy.

Philosophy is fundamentally Platonic for Badiou (MP 34) because it is a specific form of thinking that began with Plato, when the latter created one single conceptual space, or what Badiou names a space of ‘compossibility’, in which what Badiou considers to be the perpetual conditions of philosophy could be declared and thought together. These conditions are, as noted in the previous chapter, the ‘generic-procedures’ or ‘truth-procedures’ that (might) follow the events, which from time to time occur in the fields of science, art, politics and love, and that (might) induce a truth in these fields (BE 4; MP 37; C 23). However, what interests Badiou about Plato’s philosophy is not only the claim that the philosophy is conditioned by something

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return to the transcendent dimension of Platonism ; rather, it is an attempt to work out a ‘Platonism of the multiple’, that is, a Platonism that in the wake of modern mathematics acknowledges the multiplicity of being and thus gives up any recourse to the One (MP 103).

<sup>130</sup> In accordance with this Badiou (MP 97-102; C 9; D 100-102; H 36-45) also criticizes contemporary philosophy for its ‘anti-Platonism’, see for instance *Manifesto for Philosophy*, *Conditions*, *Gilles Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* and *Handbook of Inaesthetics*.

outside itself, but also the claim that philosophy is characterized by a specific relationship to these conditions, which has to do with Plato's conception of truth. According to Badiou (C 11) philosophy itself does not produce any truths, but is "[...] an operation carried out on the basis of truths, one that disposes the 'there is' of truth and their epochal compossibility." More precisely, philosophy makes the truths produced in the domains of science, politics, art and love manifest by *distinguishing* them as 'truth' from opinion or knowledge (HI 15). It is in this sense that we should understand Badiou's (C 43) assertion, that philosophy has nothing to do with hermeneutics; philosophy is not about the interpretation of its conditions, rather philosophy is an act. More precisely philosophy is, as I have already implied, the act through which the truths conditioning philosophy are separated from the ordinary circulation of sense, opinion and knowledge. Badiou (C 24) terms this separating act 'seizing':

The act of seizing [...] picks truths out from the dross of sense, separating them from the law of the world. Philosophy is subtractive in that it makes holes in sense, or causes an interruption in the circulation of sense, so that it may come that truths are said all together. Philosophy is a sense-less or mad (*insensé*) act, and by the same token rational.<sup>131</sup>

This act of seizing the truths produced by art, science, politics and love is performed by means of philosophy's 'operational category of Truth' in which all the contemporary truths produced in the four domains of science, art, politics and love can co-exist, or, enjoy a space of 'compossibility'.<sup>132</sup> All of these conditions, that is, all of the four truth-procedures, must be present and seized at the same time for philosophy to be possible. As a consequence of this, there are at least two instances in which philosophy as such dissolves. Firstly, if just one of these conditions are somehow absent there cannot, strictly speaking, be philosophy. Secondly, if philosophy privileges one (or more)

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<sup>131</sup> This seizing is, as Badiou (C 13) also make clear, a double both active and passive movement: "Philosophy is the site through which (non-philosophical) truths seize us and are seized as such."

<sup>132</sup> The philosophical category of Truth (with a capital T) is, and must remain, empty. As Badiou (C 11) says: "It operates, but it presents nothing." Badiou (C 13) also likens this operation to 'a sort of pincer movement': in one and the same movement separating out and keeping together the truths that it seizes.



of the four truth-procedures and thus subordinates itself to or identifies itself with a particular truth-procedure. Badiou (MP 61-68) terms this a ‘suturing’ of philosophy to its conditions.<sup>133</sup> So, for instance in Marxism philosophy tends to form a suture to politics, or in Positivism we have a suturing to science. In other words, a suture is formed, when “[...] philosophy *delegates* its functions to one or other of its conditions, handing over the whole of thought to *one* generic procedure. Philosophy is then carried out in the element of its own suppression to the great benefit of that procedure” (MP 61). As we shall see, Romanticism falls prey to both of these issues. Thus, in summary, three of the most significant elements that Badiou takes on and develops from Plato are (i) that philosophy is conditioned by something other than itself, (ii) that philosophy is about creating a space of compossibility in which all four of these conditions can be declared to exist together and distinctive at the same time, and (iii) that the central category for philosophy to seize its conditions and create this space of compossibility is Truth.

But there is another aspect, probably the most important, that Badiou adopts from Plato, namely the insistence on a founding and necessary entanglement of philosophy and mathematics. The insistence on the utmost importance of mathematics to philosophy is certainly a continuous and general theme in Badiou’s work. However, in the case of his critique of Romanticism, and the attempt to re-establish philosophy that this critique is part of, it must also be perceived more specifically against the backdrop of his ambiguous relationship with Heidegger.<sup>134</sup> On the very first pages of *Being and Event* Badiou (BE 2) explicitly acknowledges the most important debt he owes

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<sup>133</sup> In *Manifesto for philosophy* the concept of ‘suture’ constitutes the basic principle through which Badiou on a few pages organizes the history of 19th and 20th century philosophy in a rather superficial but also very enlightening way. As we shall see, in this period philosophy is indeed, in Badiou’s view, characterized, and thus partly annulled, by its different sutures to its conditions.

<sup>134</sup> I cannot give a detailed account of this relationship here, which would as a minimum demand an exhaustive exegesis of the meditation (11) on Heidegger in *Being and Event*. I will look further into some aspects of the critique of Heidegger proposed by Badiou in the *Manifesto for Philosophy* at the end of this chapter. For a more thorough discussions of different aspects of the relationship between Badiou and Heidegger, see: Nancy (2004), de Beistegui (2005), Lacoue-Labarthe (2007) and Clemens and Roffe (2008).

to Heidegger: “Along with Heidegger, it will be maintained that philosophy as such can only be re-assigned on the basis of the ontological question.”<sup>135</sup> However, this quotation not only confirms a Heideggerian inspiration in respect to ontology, it furthermore implies that Badiou’s attempt to ‘reassign philosophy as such’ is also prefigured in Heidegger. Although one could say – and Badiou does – that Heidegger gave up on this and instead declared the ‘end of philosophy’. Precisely because of this, Heidegger is also a major opponent in Badiou’s attempt to re-establish and rearrange philosophy according to the question of being.<sup>136</sup> At the heart of this opposition lays the platonic issue of the relationship between mathematics and philosophy. Badiou’s (MP 32) insistence, in opposition to Heidegger, on the continuation of the latter, on the possibility of taking one more step in the configuration that began with Plato, can be summarized exactly as the attempt to repeat Plato’s founding entanglement of mathematics and philosophy. Romanticism, on the other hand, is to Badiou (TW 24) just another word for the disentanglement of mathematics and philosophy. So, how should we understand this disentanglement? How did it come about? That is the question I will try to answer in a moment. But first, we need to take a closer look at what this founding entanglement of mathematics and philosophy consists in.

According to Badiou, the entanglement between mathematics and philosophy, introduced by Plato, had two significant consequences. Firstly, it was through the inauguration of the *matheme* into the poetic thought of being that philosophy was born as a new thought of being, untied from poetry. Contrary to Heidegger, Badiou (BE 126) does not understand this

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<sup>135</sup> Badiou (B 33) also praises Heidegger for having reintroduced the question of being in the short, but important text “The Question of Being Today”.

<sup>136</sup> Again, this is a rather complex matter, however, in Badiou’s (BE 10-11) view the core of it is, as he polemically states it in *Being and Event*, that: “Heidegger still remains enslaved, even in the doctrine of withdrawal and the un-veiling, to what I consider, for my part, to be the essence of metaphysics; that is, the figure of being as endowment and gift, as presence and opening, and the figure of ontology as the offering of a trajectory of proximity. I will call this type of ontology *poetic*; ontology haunted by the dissipation of Presence and the loss of the origin.” In other words, Badiou relates in roughly the same way to Heidegger as Heidegger relates to Nietzsche: Despite its critique of the metaphysics of presence Heidegger’s philosophy remains itself part of the same metaphysics.

overlapping in the thought of being as “[...] that of a forgetting, but rather that of a supplement [...] in the form of a caesura and an interruption.” Although Badiou hereby agrees with Heidegger in that there *has been* a ‘platonic turn’ in the eyes of Badiou, this turn does certainly not, as Heidegger suggests, inaugurate a forgetting of the question of being; on the contrary, it is the very institution, the beginning, of ontology proper. According to Badiou (BE 126), what Plato did by introducing the matheme was not to cover up ontology as the native figure of western philosophy, but rather to found this figure by untying thought from its enchainment to the poem. Secondly, the relationship to mathematics also had significant consequences for the category of truth, because it imposed “[...] an interruption of the collusion organized by the poem between truth and the sacred authority of the image or of the story” (C 36). So, it is really through mathematics that philosophy attains a concept of truth which, founded on an event that has no objective verifiable content, interrupts or breaks with knowledge or the general opinion. The relation between philosophy and mathematics established by Plato is thus absolutely imperative for Badiou.

However, there is also an attempt on Badiou’s behalf to modify an aspect of this relationship. In contrast to Plato, Badiou’s insistence on a necessary entanglement of mathematics and philosophy does not entail that he on account of mathematics simply expels poetry from philosophy, since on Badiou’s (HI 36-45) own terms this would strictly speaking be an annulment of philosophy all together. But, there is surely a hierarchy or a priority between mathematics and poetry in Badiou’s (BE 126) philosophy, since: “The Greeks did not invent the poem. Rather, they *interrupted* the poem with the matheme.” And there is no doubt also a conflict between them, but a conflict in terms of a resemblance, since poetry, at least in its modern form, like mathematics is a means of subtraction in terms of its ‘method of disobjectivation’ (MP 76).<sup>137</sup> Thus, for Badiou it seems to be a question of maintaining a tension between mathematics and poetry, rather than excluding the one over the other. While Plato ended up banishing the poets from the polis and Heidegger in his return to the pre-Socratics wanted to exclude mathematics from philosophy, Badiou (HI 44) wants to follow Pessoa’s example

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<sup>137</sup> According to Badiou there are principally two different methods of disobjectivation in poetry represented by Mallarmé and Rimbaud. See Badiou *Conditions* (chapter 5 and 6).

and take a path in between: “Pessoa’s modernity lies in casting doubt on the pertinence of the Platonism/anti-Platonism opposition: The task of the thought-poem is neither allegiance to Platonism nor its reversal.”

*Philosophy’s Suturing to Art and Disentanglement from Mathematics*

This finally brings us back to the contemporary proclamation of the ‘end of philosophy’ and Badiou’s critique of Romanticism and its adherence to the theme of finitude. Because, in Badiou’s (MP 67) view, the problem of most of today’s philosophy is first of all its continued suturing to one of its conditions, namely art, or more precisely poetry. If we dig a little deeper, this suturing has its origin in a disentanglement of philosophy and mathematics which commenced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the advent of Romanticism, as well as in philosophy’s attempt to disconnect itself from two other sutures (which ultimately also has its root in the romantic disentanglement of philosophy and mathematics). Badiou (TW 27) sees this double-incident of philosophy’s disentanglement from mathematics and suturing to poetry as the basis of the wide-spread presupposition of the ‘end of philosophy’, and, what is the mere flipside of this presupposition, “[...] the increasing collusion between philosophy (or what passes for philosophy) and religions of all kinds [...]”. Badiou’s double rupture with this double-incident therefore invokes a severe critique of the metaphysics of finitude.

So how did the romantic disentanglement of mathematics and philosophy come about? In Badiou’s (TW 23) exposition of the history of philosophy it is easy to trace how from Plato all the way through Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz up to and including Kant, mathematics played a very important role in philosophy as the singular form of thinking that “[...] allowed the inaugural break with superstition and ignorance.” Or in other words, mathematics has always been the most powerful means to secularize and thus enable philosophy’s attempt to think the infinite apart from the One. “But the philosophy of Romanticism”, as Badiou (TW 24) puts it, has “[...] shaped the conviction that philosophy can and must deploy a thinking that does not at any moment internalize mathematics as condition for that deployment.” And so with the advent of romantic philosophy, in which Hegel is the decisive figure, philosophy

separates itself from mathematics.<sup>138</sup> This separation came about first of all through the historicism, or what Badiou (TW 25) also depicts as a ‘temporalization of the concept’, which was introduced by romanticism.<sup>139</sup> As, Badiou (TW 26) explains:

It was the newfound certainty that the infinite or true being could only be apprehended through its own temporality that led the Romantics to depose mathematics from its localization as a condition for philosophy. Thus the ideal and atemporal character of mathematical thinking figured as the central argument in this deposition.

Thus Romanticism establishes a still highly effective polemical opposition between mathematics, depicted as static and lifeless, and time as the fundamental element of dynamic life (TW 25-26). In the tenet of Romanticism: Is not the ‘abstract poverty’ of cold mathematics obvious compared to the richness and vitality of real concrete life? Against this background, mathematics loses its status as a resource for thinking infinity; also infinity must be thought as a historical concept. More specifically, the old status of mathematics as the main resource for thinking infinity is taken over by philosophy itself.

Badiou’s main example here is Hegel, in so far that Badiou wants to illustrate the inauguration of historicism through an examination of Hegel’s analysis of the infinite. According to Badiou, the change that occurs in the relationship between philosophy and mathematics is due to the fact that in Hegel’s

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<sup>138</sup> In the “Introduction” to the *Science of Logic* Hegel (1989, 53) does indeed explicitly call for such a separation of philosophy from mathematics: “Spinoza, Wolf and others have let themselves be misled in applying it [mathematics] also to philosophy and in making the external course followed by Notion-less quantity, the course of the Notion, a procedure which is absolutely contradictory. Hitherto philosophy had not found its method; it regarded with envy the systematic structure of mathematics and, as we have said, borrowed it [...]. However, the exposition of what alone can be the truth method of philosophical science falls within the treatment of logic itself; for the method is the consciousness of the form of the inner self-movement of the content of logic.”

<sup>139</sup> Of course one wonders here how Badiou can completely ignore that in modern philosophy from Nietzsche to Foucault history has served as an important resource for critique. And even in pre-modern philosophy history was used as a critical weapon. Thus Spinoza’s critique of the Judaic-Christian religion in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* was done, not on the basis of mathematic, but on the contrary on basis of early historical-critical method in biblical exegesis.

analysis in the *Science of Logic*, the mathematical infinite is represented as a *concept*, rather than as a domain of objects (numbers and figures), which had been the common way of representation in mathematics since Plato.<sup>140</sup> By representing the mathematical infinite in terms of a concept Hegel sets it on par with the philosophical concept of the infinite. And in short, Badiou's (TW 37) complaint is that by doing this (representing the mathematical infinite as a concept) Hegel crucially turns the relationship between philosophy and mathematics into a relationship of rivalry.

This radically changes the perspective on the relationship between the mathematical and the philosophical infinite. In his reading of a passage from the section on the 'infinity of quantum' in *Science of Logic*, in which Hegel examines the mathematics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Badiou (TW 19) praises the latter for seeing "[...] before anyone else: ultimately, mathematics proposes a new concept of the infinite." However, and this is where Badiou's criticism begins, in Hegel's perceptive (in which the relationship between the mathematical and the philosophical infinite is one of rivalry) this new mathematical conception of the infinite is in the end just a necessary stage on the passage to a more adequate speculative or philosophical concept of infinity. Or, as Badiou (TW 37) critically notes: "Once instructed by philosophy as to the true concept of the infinite we see that its mathematical concept is no more than a crude, dispensable stage on the way to the former." In the end Hegel identifies the mathematical infinite with what he famously terms the 'bad' infinite (*schlechte Unendlichkeit*), that is to say, the infinite perceived as an endless succession of finite elements (like for instance a line of numbers 1, 2, 3...). As such the 'bad' infinite is nothing but the endless repetition of one finite element after another. However, Badiou not only disagrees with Hegel about whether the mathematical infinite can be reduced to this concept of 'bad' infinite, he vigorously rejects the latter's conception of the 'good' (philosophical) infinite. This of course raises the question of what the characteristics of this Hegelian, and more widely the romantic philosophical concept

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<sup>140</sup> In the following I will keep to Badiou's label designations 'the philosophical infinite' and 'the mathematical infinite', though the prevailing terminology in the field of philosophical research in the infinite is 'the metaphysically infinite' and 'the mathematically infinite' (Moore 2002).

of the infinite are, and how it is different from the mathematical infinite as Badiou understands it.

In short, Badiou's (TW 26) answer to these questions is that romantic philosophy "[...] established the idea that the genuine infinite only manifests itself as a horizontal structure *for the historicity of the finitude of existence*. But both the representation of the limit as a horizon and the theme of finitude are entirely foreign to mathematics, whose own conception of the limit is that of a present-point and whose thinking of requires presupposition of the infinity of its site." While the mathematical conception of an abstract and empty infinity is indifferent to temporality, the conception of the infinite forwarded by Romanticism is thought in relation to the theme of finitude. With Romanticism, infinity becomes the un-crossable limit against which man appears in all his fragile and ephemeral historicity. At the same time infinity, as an unreachable horizon of finiteness, also becomes an irredeemable lost object of an insatiable yearning. Infinity is thus placed in opposition to frail materiality and historical mortality, or in short finitude. And it is precisely the theme of finitude that is the heart of the matter in Badiou's (TW 28) critique of Romanticism's devaluation of mathematics: "There is a very tenacious and profound link between the disentanglement of mathematics and philosophy and the preservation, in the inverted or diverted form of finitude, of a non-appropriable or unnameable horizon of immortal divinity." Hampering the continued mathematical secularization of the infinite by localizing the infinite as a horizontal correlative for the historicity of finitude, Romanticism thus keeps the door open for a return of the divine. The theme of finitude re-sacralises existence with its nostalgic longing after and its latent promise of an unattainable infinity. Again, for Badiou the stakes of this are obvious: "As long as finitude remains the ultimate determination of existence, God abides. He abides as that whose disappearance continues to hold sway over us, in the form of the abandonment, the dereliction, or leaving-behind of Being" (TW 28). But more precisely what God is it that abides with Romanticism? Badiou's answer is, as we shall see, first and foremost the God of the poets. This brings us to Badiou's critique of the contemporary philosopher of finitude par excellence, namely Martin Heidegger.

### Heidegger Revisited

Romanticism designates the period in which philosophy is characterized by its disentanglement from mathematics, but as mentioned earlier it is also a period characterized by philosophy's suturing to poetry.<sup>141</sup> Yet, poetry is not the only condition that philosophy has been sutured to in the wake of Romanticism. As a consequence of its disentanglement from mathematics, philosophy has since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in fact been the captive of a whole network of sutures to its conditions (MP 64). The most important of these being the scientific or Positivist, and the Marxist. In his *Manifesto for philosophy*, Badiou describes how these two sutures have hampered philosophy from the nineteenth century and well into twentieth century. However, philosophy did also try to resist these sutures. And actually the most effective resistance paradoxically turned out to be forming a new suture, namely a suture to art, first of all to poetry. Or as, Badiou (MP 66) puts it:

If, in the nineteenth century and beyond, philosophy endured the dual suture to its political condition and its scientific condition, it is entirely understandable that, especially since Nietzsche, the temptation to be delivered through suturing to another condition is wielded onto it. Art was fully designated. What culminates with Heidegger is the anti-positivist and anti-Marxist effort to put philosophy in the hands of the poem.

This period of philosophy's suture to poetry that begins in the nineteenth century overlaps to some degree with what Badiou calls 'the age of poets' (MP 69). A title that alludes to the fact that while philosophy through its suture to poetry gave way on its own project, poetry concurrently took on parts of this project. Thus the age of poets is characterized by a number of poets like Hölderlin, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Trakl, Pessoa, Mandelstam and Celan who are doing a sort of philosophy instead of philosophy itself (MP 69-77). According to Badiou though, the age of poets came to an end with Paul Celan, in whose poems Badiou (MP 86) "read, as poetically stated, the avowal that poetry no longer suffices to itself; that it requests to be relieved of the burden of

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<sup>141</sup> In *Handbook of Inaesthetics* and *The Century* Badiou furthermore extends this critique of Romanticism to art. For a thorough study, that places Badiou's discussion of Romanticism in relation to the immense field of literature on this subject, see Justin Clemens (2003) book *The Romanticism in Contemporary Theory*.



the suture, that it hopes for a philosophy relieved of the crushing authority of the poem.” And this brings us back to the proclamation of the end of philosophy and to Heidegger.

In Badiou’s view, Heidegger’s designation of modern science and the totalitarian state as the main effects of technology is not completely off the mark, since Heidegger hereby actually highlights the two dominant sutures that thought must separate itself from if it is not to vanish in its philosophical form. However, in stark opposition to Badiou, the path that Heidegger suggests is not a return to philosophy, since in Heidegger’s view philosophy as such has been realized as technology and has thus come to an end. Instead Heidegger delegates thought to its artistic condition, to poetry (MP 66-67). Thus, in Badiou’s opinion, philosophy has still not taken Celan’s request to un-suture itself from poetry seriously; on the contrary, the suture has been widely sustained, by Heidegger and his successors. In this sense Romanticism still prevails (MP 66; H 6; IF 42).<sup>142</sup> As Badiou (MP 67) puts it: “[...] what has given potency to the poeticizing suture, and thus to Heidegger, is far from having been undone, indeed has never even been examined.”<sup>143</sup>

Hence while Badiou credits Heidegger for exposing philosophy’s sutures to its scientific and political conditions, he is fiercely opposed to the Heideggerian narrative of technology as the nihilist culmination of the history of metaphysics as forgetting of being, or in other words technology and nihilism as the realization of philosophy. Not only because Heidegger through this narrative, and his delegation of thought to the poem, proclaims the end of philosophy, but because he, in Badiou’s (TW 42) view, hereby also proclaims the return of religion: “In Heidegger himself the characterisation of metaphysics as history

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<sup>142</sup> The successors Badiou have in mind are first and foremost the French philosophers Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. But of course Heidegger’s heirs are far more wide-ranging. See Clemens and Roffe (2008).

<sup>143</sup> Although Heidegger certainly is Badiou’s main target of critique in his discussion of the relationship between philosophy and poetry, he nevertheless also acknowledges a certain debt to the latter: “I want to retain from Heidegger the devaluation of philosophical aesthetics and the critical limitation of the effects of the Platonic procedure of exclusion. On the other hand, I want to contest the idea that philosophy is, as is claimed, in conditions that are those of its end and that this end must be sutured to the authority, one without argument, of the poem” (C 40). See also *Manifesto for philosophy* (MP 74).

of being is inseparable from a proclamation whose ultimate expression, it has to be admitted, is that ‘only a god can save us’.” While Heidegger and his successors certainly have exercised a devastating critique of metaphysic as onto-theology, not just in its classical form, but in all its modern and postmodern guises, paradoxically, the same critique keeps the door open for the re-sacralisation of the world. It makes possible “[...] the hypothesis of a return of the Gods, of an event wherein the mortal danger to which the annihilating will expose Man – technology’s civil servant – would be surpassed or conjured away by a sheltering of Being [...]” (MP 51). Thus under the reign of Heidegger’s thought, philosophy is “caught between the depletion of its historical possibility and the coming without concept of a salvational turnabout” (C 4). A ‘salvational turnabout’ that Badiou (MP 51) sees Heidegger as placing in the hands of the poets: “To say ‘only a God can save us’ means: the thinking that poets teach [...] may uphold at the heart of nihilism the possibility, devoid of any way or means open to utterance, of a resacralization of the Earth.” In other words, the God that abides with the assertion of the end of philosophy is the God of the poets (B 28).<sup>144</sup> However, according to Badiou (CT 31), the critical abolishment of the God of the poets is first of all the task, not of philosophy, but of poetry.

So to summarize: Badiou’s critique of Romanticism, including his engagement with Heidegger, can be seen as an attempt to dissolve philosophy’s contemporary suture to the poem by way of enacting a platonic ‘re-entanglement’ of philosophy with mathematics. It is through this manoeuvre that he claims that it is possible to expel the religious tendencies in romantic philosophy’s return to the One in the form of the theme of finitude.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the (predominantly negative) notion of religion implicit in Badiou’s work by examining the way in which he both directly and indirectly relates to the issue of religion through his engagement in a number of philosophical and political polemics. More precisely, I have focused on three different but interrelated polemical incidents in which Badiou

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<sup>144</sup> For critical discussion of Badiou’s reading of Heidegger see the first chapter of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s (2007, 19-37) book *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry*.

engages critically with religion: his critique of what I have called the metaphysics of finitude, his attempt against the contemporary prophecies of its end to re-establish the autonomy of philosophy, and his critique of religion as a strategy to marginalize his rivals.

From a strictly theological perspective, the significance of Badiou's critical engagement with the metaphysics of finitude does perhaps not so much concern the critique of religion that this engagement also involves. Not only because the implicit critique of religion that can be extracted from Badiou's critique of the metaphysics of finitude does not really in any aspect surpass the more sophisticated traditional critiques of religion from Hume to Freud, but perhaps even more so because it is very questionable to which degree (if any at all) any real existing religion would be able to actually recognize itself in and thus be affected by Badiou's critique, since his engagement with religion in its concrete forms (religious texts, practices and institutions) is next to none. In line with this, two questions arise. Firstly, does not Badiou's rather broad definition of religion as the equation of meaning and truth risk complete over-determination, so that anything can be designated as religion, and secondly, does this definition of religion really encompass all religious experiences and practices? Or, as Žižek (PV 182) stresses in a passage from *The Parallax View*, following a discussion of Lacan's contrast between meaning and truth and the critical comments on religion proposed in his 1974 Rome interview: "The key question about religion today is: can all religious experiences and practices in fact be contained within this dimension of the conjunction of truth and meaning? Does not Judaism, with its imposition of a traumatic Law, adumbrate a dimension of truth outside meaning (which is why Judaism is the mortal enemy of any Gnostic obscurantism)? And, at a different level, does not the same go for Saint Paul himself?" But the key-question is of course, to what extent Badiou's 'critique of religion' is actually at all directed against religion or theology as such. As I emphasized at the beginning of this chapter, it seems rather to be the case that there are other issues at stake in this critique, namely, besides the critique of the metaphysics finitude, an attempt to restore the autonomy of philosophy and to marginalise philosophical rivals, like Heidegger. This confirms that religion seems first of all to have a polemical function in Badiou's philosophy. And in this respect, it might actually even be an advantage to present a caricature.

If Badiou's critique of finitude nevertheless has something important to offer theology, it is because it clarifies, on at least two issues, the stakes with which theology is currently confronted. Firstly and most importantly Badiou's critique of finitude holds a serious warning for theology (although it was almost certainly not the intention) of the temptations of so-called 'post-metaphysical' thought. 'Deconstruction', 'weak thought' and other forms of contemporary 'post-metaphysical' philosophy might keep a space open for religion, but apparently only at the risk of abandoning the very possibility of *thinking* God, and thus in the end of compromising theology as such; at least if theology is to be something more than a purely negative or apophatic theology.<sup>145</sup> Secondly, Badiou's critique of the metaphysics of finitude implies the insistence on an important distinction between what we are (mortal animals) and what we can do (participate in a truth). Such a distinction is certainly not foreign to Christian theology. And though there is, as Badiou himself has pointed out, an essential and (perhaps) absolute difference between the way in which this distinction is perceived in Badiou's philosophy and in Christian theology,<sup>146</sup> it might give occasion for theology to consider and think through the potential of this distinction in our present situation.

Let me end by suggesting that the severe critique of the influential theme of finitude in today's philosophical scene should not be taken as a denial by Badiou of the finite aspect of our existence or of the problematic consequences such a denial might have, but what he is denying is that this should be a pressing or even particularly important problem. As we have seen, Badiou seems to think of the question of our infinity or even our 'immortality' as a far more important issue. Or, as he

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<sup>145</sup> This is of course not to imply that theology is supposed to be unaware of this issue (which in some sense has been the most urgent issue for theology ever since Kant's *Critique of pure Reason*). A substantial example of a contemporary theologian who has not only remarked, but also tried - in an extraordinary lucid and forceful way - to respond to 'the fact that we no longer dare to think God' is Eberhard Jüngel (1983, vii).

<sup>146</sup> Badiou emphasizes this difference in the way which this distinction is made in his own philosophy versus in Christian theology through the following opposition between Paul Ricoeur and himself: "[...] it is decidedly impossible to say, as does Ricoeur: 'You are worth more than your acts'. It is the very opposite that must be affirmed: 'It can happen, rarely, that your acts are worth more than you'." Badiou, "The Subject Supposed to be Christian: On Paul Ricoeur's Memory, History, Forgetting," 9.

points out in a recent essay discussing Simon Critchley's book, *Infinitely Demanding*: "Yes, we have the utmost difficulty in accepting our limitedness and so on. But if there exists something like the possibility of an infinite demand, there is something infinite in human nature. And maybe the problem sometimes is not at all to accept our finitude, but to accept our infinite dimension."<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Badiou, "On Simon Critchley's *Infinitely Demanding*: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance," 156.

## Chapter 3

### Materialism or Theology? Yes, Please!

*And the Word became flesh*

John 1:14

#### Introduction

In his introduction to a lecture given in 2007 at the European Graduate School, Slavoj Žižek sketches a by now rather familiar contemporary antagonism between ‘the rise of religious fundamentalism’ and, as he puts it, ‘a very vulgar materialism claiming that religion is basically stupid and ethically hurtful’, propagated above all by the troika of ‘New Atheism’ (Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris).<sup>148</sup> However, as Žižek rightly emphasizes, we should absolutely reject this antagonism as a false alternative. The reason we should refuse a choice between these two positions is not only that it represents a caricature of both materialism and religion, but also because it obscures the true antagonism or dividing line running between on the one hand both of these positions (which, as Žižek (MC 92) suggests, might in fact turn out to be two sides of the same coin) and on the other hand a third position in terms of an alternative genuine materialism. Badiou’s remark in an interview given in 2005 that “[...] in the present world the great and fundamental problem is not between the religious way and the non-religious way” could perhaps be read in a similar manner.<sup>149</sup> Yet there is also another and from my perspective even more important reason to reject this false alternative, namely that it

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<sup>148</sup> A video-recording of Žižek’s lecture is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9S3vvPe9IM> (entered 24 Marts 2010). In *Monstrosity of Christ* Žižek (MC 94) links this antagonism to politics in the following way: “[...] the recent popularity of scientific materialist direct attacks on religion [...] is certainly sustained by the ideological need to present the liberal West as bastion of Reason against the crazy Muslim and other irrational fundamentalist.”

<sup>149</sup> Badiou, “An Interview with Alain Badiou: Universal Truths and the Question of Religion,” 41-42. Of course there is something very inconsistent or even self-contradictory in this remark, since as we have just seen in the previous chapter there is indeed a very rigid opposition between religion and non-religion at the centre of Badiou’s own work.

precludes a potentially fruitful dialogue between (a genuine) materialism and theology.

In this chapter I will explore the prospects of such a dialogue in four steps. First, I will begin by clarifying what is at stake in Badiou's and Žižek's concern for materialism, and by outlining the most fundamental, and apparently shared, characteristics of Badiou's and Žižek's materialism. Second, I will test the soundness of Badiou's materialism by going over the criticism of 'idealist dangers' or even 'religious tendencies' in his philosophy as they have been advanced by Žižek.<sup>150</sup> Badiou maintains that in contrast to the kind of materialism that he opposes – which risks coinciding with religious or spiritualist idealism – the materialism that he proposes entails a fully atheist position, so this is a quite important issue. Next, I will examine two episodes in Badiou's work in which the issue of materialism and theology is raised explicitly. Common to these two episodes is that they both arise within the context of a discussion of Hegel. It is well-known that one of Žižek's most consistent philosophical endeavours has been a materialist re-actualization of Hegel, and lately in *The Monstrosity of Christ* he has even combined this endeavour with a 'plea for a Hegelian reading of Christianity'. Thus, as we shall see, Hegel constitutes a key-reference in terms of the divergences between Badiou and Žižek on the issue of materialism and theology. Another quite important divergence, at least in the present context, is that whereas Badiou's pledge to atheism seems to categorically exclude any positive reference to religion or theology, the numerous hints made by Žižek (EYS 99-102; PF 100-104; TTS 113-119; PD 6; PV; 75-86, 103; MC 82-101, 240, 268-303) about the materialist potential of Christianity suggest that in his case the elaboration of an atheist materialism in no way rules out an affirmative interaction with theology and religion. In the last part of the chapter I will

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<sup>150</sup> It seems that to both Badiou and Žižek there is little if any difference between idealism and religion. Žižek is far from the only one to have traced idealist tendencies in Badiou's professed materialist philosophy. Reservations towards various different aspects of idealism and doubts about the genuine materialist character of Badiou's philosophy have been put forward by, among others, Brassier (2005, 140), Osborne (2007, 24; 27), Johnston (2008a, 29; 32; 38; 44) and Feltham (2008, 57). More unconcealed accusations of the 'religious' character of aspects of Badiou's philosophy have been proposed by Bensaïd (2004, 98; 101), Smith (2004, 93), Osborne (2007, 25-26) and Johnston (2008a, 35; 38). However, I will limit myself to Žižek's critique.

elucidate this issue through an inquiry into the differences in Badiou's and Žižek's reading of the doctrine of incarnation.

### **The Split of Materialism**

In *Materialism and Empirio-criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy* published in 1908, Lenin famously depicts the history of Western philosophy as largely a struggle between two characterizations of reality: idealism and materialism.<sup>151</sup> Lenin's depiction echoes Friedrich Engels' (1996, 20-21) account in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* of the two diverging answers given throughout the history of philosophy to the question of the relationship between thinking and being:

The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in some form or other [...] comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism (Engels 1996, 21).

According to both Badiou and Žižek, this struggle continues with unrelenting strength today.<sup>152</sup> However, they also agree that there is a noticeable difference from the previous historical stages of this struggle, namely that the traditional frontline of the struggle, the dividing line between the two camps, has been displaced. In the words of Badiou (LW 526): "[...] I argue that rather than opposing emancipatory materialism to a putative bourgeois idealism we should divide materialism itself." Thus

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<sup>151</sup> In Lenin's (1970, 166) words: "Could the struggle between materialism and idealism, the struggle between the tendencies or lines of Plato and Democritus in philosophy, the struggle between religion and science, the denial of objective truth and its assertion, the struggle between the adherents of supersensible knowledge and its adversaries have become antiquated during the two thousand years of the development of philosophy?"

<sup>152</sup> In 2008 Badiou and Žižek thus organized a conference in London entitled "Materialism Today" celebrating Lenin's book. As they put it in the conference announcement: "2008 will be the centenary of Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, the book which focused on the ongoing struggle between materialism and idealism. Where do we stand today with regard to this struggle? The aim of this conference is to clarify the coordinates of this struggle, with Alain Badiou's new masterpiece *Logiques des Mondes* as the central point of reference." <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/news/news-releases/20070618/> (entered 23 March 2010).



both Badiou and Žižek have as their declared ambition to present a materialism which is not merely meant to dispute, as Žižek (PV 4) puts it, ‘idealist obscurantism’, but which first of all opposes itself to a certain ‘mechanical materialism’, or in Badiou’s (LW 2) case a ‘democratic materialism’.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Badiou employs the expression ‘materialist dialectics’ to designate the kind of materialism that he proposes as an alternative to ‘democratic materialism’. The latter is associated by Badiou (LW 2) with a contemporary paradigm of ‘bio-politics’ in which the finite organic life is promoted as an ethical, political and epistemological fulcrum; or in short, in which we are subjected to ‘the dogma of our finitude’. Badiou’s (LW 3-4) ‘materialist dialectics’ aims to rectify the claim of ‘democratic materialism’ that ‘there is only bodies and language’ by adding ‘except that there are truths’, and to do so without succumbing to the temptation of ‘endorsing an aristocratic idealism’, as Badiou puts it. It is evident from Badiou’s (LW 3-4) remarks in the preface to *Logics of Worlds* that he, at least to some extent, understands his ‘materialist dialectics’ as a continuation of the ‘dialectical materialism’ promoted by Althusser (and by Badiou himself in his earlier writings), but that he refrains from using the latter term because of its biased history. In any case, this reference might seem surprising considering Badiou’s (BE 4) explicit rejection of dialectical materialism in the introduction to *Being and Event*. Indeed, it might even be quite confusing for someone who has only read books like *Saint Paul* or *Metapolitics*, which are outright anti-dialectic. On the other hand, the usage of the term ‘dialectical materialism’ and the attempt to renew the tradition that this term designates is not exactly something new to Badiou, whose very first publication was a text entitled “Le (re)commencement du matérialisme dialectique” on Althusser’s *Reading Capital* and *For Marx*. It is likewise a very frequently used term in *Theory of the Subject*. All this raises the following very reasonable question: What is Badiou, a dialectician or an anti-dialectician? This question is one of the most controversial issues in the reception of Badiou’s work, and its answer has far reaching consequence for the understanding of several key aspects of his philosophy.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, the issue of dialectics is,

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<sup>153</sup> Put simply, the bone of contention in this debate is whether or not *Being and Event* signals a far-reaching displacement in Badiou’s work from dialectics to (anti-dialectical) mathematical subtraction. This issue is very

as we shall see in the following, not without consequences for Badiou's understanding of theology.

Žižek (PV 387) on the other hand fully embraces 'dialectal materialism' as the label for his position underlining the common-ground between Badiou and himself in their shared "[...] conviction that the time has come openly to assume this problematic term [...]." Thus, in the preface to what Žižek (PV 4) himself describes as his magnum opus, *The Parallax View*, he announces that the wager of this book is to begin the rehabilitation of the philosophy of dialectical materialism through a proper theorization of the notion of the 'parallax gap'. However, both Žižek's preoccupation with a reformation of materialism and the use of the term 'dialectical materialism' go much further back in his work. As Adrian Johnston (2008b) demonstrates in his outstanding book, *Žižek's ontology*, such a reformation of (dialectical) materialism is indeed an important inherent element in what he argues is the very centre and most continuous aspect of Žižek's philosophical work, namely the elaboration of a 'transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity' based on a Lacanian rereading of the key figures of German Idealism. That theology has a part to play in this project is hinted by Žižek (IR 37; PD 6), not only through his reading in *The Indivisible Remainder* of Schelling's *Weltalter*, a profoundly theological text, as 'the founding text of dialectical materialism', but also explicitly in his provocative claim in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* that: "[...] to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience." Although Žižek sympathises with Badiou's attack on the bio-political paradigm of 'democratic materialism' (and the watered-down vitalism

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important in terms of how the relationship between being and event should be understood. Again to put it simply: Does the event signal an absolute break with being (the 'evental site'), or is there a more dialectical relationship between being (the 'evental site') and event? Peter Hallward (1998; 2003; 2004), and as we shall see Žižek, argues that the former is the case, while Bruno Bosteels (2001; 2002; 2004; 2005b) defends the latter point of view, arguing that the concern with the (dialectical materialist) problem of how to think novelty without any recourse to transcendence is a continuous issue in Badiou's work. And he (2005b 608) urges Badiou's critics to at least recognize the constant struggle in Badiou's work to avoid treating the evental process as transcendent by separating it absolutely from the situation. For Badiou's own comments on the matter of dialectic, see Badiou, "Can Change be Thought?," 246-253 and Badiou, "Beyond formalization: An interview," 122-25. See also Johnston's (2007c) clarifying account of this controversy.

underpinning it) the main target of his own critique seems first of all to be confined to a ‘vulgar’ scientific materialism.<sup>154</sup> This and other significant differences aside, Žižek and Badiou do fundamentally agree on the need to propose an alternative (dialectical) materialism, not only against obscurantist idealism, but also against reductive or mechanical materialism. How then, more precisely, is the kind of (dialectical) materialism advocated by Badiou and Žižek different from the ‘vulgar’ materialism that they oppose? And what exactly is the problem with the latter?

To put it plainly, the main problem with the type of materialism against which Badiou and Žižek oppose themselves seems to be that it is both too materialist, in the sense that it precludes itself from accounting for a series of important (immaterial) human phenomena, and not materialist enough, in the sense that it still implicates a certain tendency towards idealism. Although both Badiou (TS 193) and Žižek (MC 287) maintain along with Engels and Lenin that materialism must always assert the primacy of matter over thought, the material over the immaterial, they also both uphold that the alternative materialism they have in mind in no way entails the jettison of fundamental philosophical notions of immaterial phenomena such as subjectivity, freedom and truth; on the contrary, their rather counter-intuitive assertion is that the only proper way to ground and uphold these notions is exactly through an entirely materialist ontology. As Žižek (MC 93) explains in an approving comment on *Logics of Worlds*:

This makes clear the true stakes of Badiou’s gesture: In order for materialism to truly win over idealism, it is not enough to succeed in the ‘reductionist’ approach and demonstrate how mind, consciousness, etc., can nonetheless somehow be accounted for within the evolutionary-positivist materialist frame; on the contrary, the materialist claim should be much stronger: it is *only* materialism which can accurately explain the very phenomena of mind, consciousness, etc.; and, conversely, it is idealism which always-already ‘reifies’ them, which is ‘vulgar’.

So, put differently, the claim here seems to be that the kind of materialism proposed by Badiou and Žižek is a materialism which paradoxically defends and explains the autonomy of the immaterial order of subjectivity, transcending any absolute

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<sup>154</sup> Žižek’s most thorough discussion of this matter is thus found in his engagement with contemporary Cognitive Science in *The Parallax View*.

opposition between thinking and being, mind and matter, but *without* reducing the one to the other.<sup>155</sup> That is, a materialism, which supposedly surpasses the traditional philosophical opposition between naturalism and freedom. Yet, another way to describe this sort of materialism that Badiou and Žižek advocate would be in terms of immanence and transcendence: like any kind of materialism worth its name, it entails an assertion of pure immanence, but, and this is the heart of the matter, it also claims that this immanence is of such a character that it nevertheless generates transcendent phenomena. And this brings us to the most central feature of such a non-reductive materialism, namely the assertion of an ontological ‘openness’ or ‘incompleteness’ of reality. For both Badiou and Žižek, the fundamental axiom for the construction of a general ontology is, as Badiou states in the first meditation of *Being and Event*, that ‘the One is not’, or in Žižek’s Lacanian parlour, that ‘the big Other does not exist’.<sup>156</sup> A genuine non-reductive materialism acquires acceptance of the full ontological consequence of this (the inexistence of the One/big Other). In *The Parallax View* (in a chapter interestingly entitled ‘Building Blocks for a Materialist Theology’) Žižek (PV 79) attempts to explain more precisely what this means through the following contrast:

That is the difference between idealism and materialism: for the idealist, we experience our situation as ‘open’ insofar as we are engaged in it, while the same situation appears ‘closed’ from the standpoint of finality, that is from the eternal point of view of the omnipotent and all-knowing God who alone can perceive the world

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<sup>155</sup> It is, as Johnston (2007d, 6) points out in his excellent review of *The Parallax view*, this aspect which in Žižek’s mind makes his materialism ‘dialectical’: “What makes Žižek’s materialism specifically dialectic, on his account, is its ability to elucidate the material genesis of the more-than-material phenomena and structures.” In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou (LW 4) provides the following more formal, but nevertheless parallel, definition of dialectic: “Let’s agree that by ‘dialectic’, following Hegel, we are to understand that the essence of all difference is the third term that marks the gap between the two others.”

<sup>156</sup> In Žižek’s wide-ranging reading of Lacan he refers repeatedly to the notion of the ‘big Other’, which he employs in various different ways, just as he also uses Lacan’s expression ‘the big Other doesn’t exist’ (*l’Autre n’existe pas*) in more than one way. Here, the non-existence of the big Other basically designates the fact that there is no kind of guarantee of global meaning holding together being as an organic whole. However, the fact that the One/the big Other does not exist, does not mean, as both Žižek (IR 206; LA 71) and Badiou (BE 23) emphasize, that it does not *function*.

as a closed totality; for the materialist, the ‘openness’ goes all the way down, that is, necessity is not the underlying universal law that secretly regulates the chaotic interplay of appearances – it is the ‘All’ itself which is non-All, inconsistent, marked by irreducible contingency.

It is worth noting, particularly in the present context, that Žižek also links materialism with the acknowledgment of the big Other’s non-existence more explicitly, namely with reference to the fundamental event in Christian theology, the death of Christ: “[...] the singular point of the emergence of materialism is signalled by Christ’s words on the cross ‘Father, why have you forsaken me?’ — in this moment of total abandonment, the subject experiences and fully assumes *the nonexistence of the big Other*.”<sup>157</sup> This concession of the big Other’s inexistence, the ‘death of God’, is crucial as it is Žižek’s (TTS 60; PV 168) claim that the ontological incompleteness of reality, which follows from this, is what allows for the possibility of subjective freedom.

But, what does it mean that a genuine materialist ontology, founded on the assertion of the non-existence of the One/the big Other, is characterized by ‘openness’ or ‘incompleteness’? As hinted in the above quotation, the Lacanian logic of ‘non-All’, which is a recurrent element in Žižek’s writings, offers an instructive way to clarify this (PV 168; MC 100).<sup>158</sup> Simplifying things a bit, and leaving out the logic symbols Lacan uses, we can say that Lacan distinguishes between two inherently antagonistic formulas: the ‘masculine’ and the ‘feminine’.<sup>159</sup> The masculine formula states that: ‘All X are submitted to the phallic function’ [but] ‘there exists an X who is not submitted to the phallic function’. The feminine formula states that: ‘There does not exist any X who is exempt from the phallic function’ [but] ‘Not-all X are submitted to the phallic function’. The logic of the masculine formula is the logic of the ‘constitutive exception’, i.e.

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<sup>157</sup> Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin’s choice,” 180. I will examine this statement and its consequences along with more thoroughly in chapter five, which focuses more explicitly on Žižek’s (materialist) conception of theology.

<sup>158</sup> ‘Non-All’ or ‘not-All’ is Žižek’s preferred translation of ‘Pas-tout’ a key-term in Lacan’s formulas of sexualization. Others, such as Bruce Fink, the translator of seminar XX (*On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*) in which Lacan (1998, 78-81) introduced his formulas of sexualization, prefers ‘not-whole’. I will keep to Žižek’s translation.

<sup>159</sup> Here I roughly follow Žižek’s (FTKN 121-123) presentation of the formulas in *For They Know Not What They Do*.

the logic according to which the exception confirms the rule, exemplified for instance in the religious idea that everything obeys natural causality – with the exception of the God who guarantees the laws of nature. The logic of the feminine formula, on the other hand, states that while nothing escapes natural causality, not all obey natural laws. Not in the sense that there is something outside the order of causality, something that escapes it, but in the sense that it is the ‘totality’ of the order of causality itself which is inconsistent, non-All. As Žižek (PV 168) implies in the following quote, these two logics of the ‘formulas of sexuation’ thus constitute a helpful way to distinguish a ‘non-reductive’ materialism from the kind of materialism that it is opposed to:

In order to specify the meaning of materialism, one should apply Lacan’s formulas of sexuation: there is a fundamental difference between the assertion ‘everything is matter (which relies on its constitutive exception – in the case of Lenin who, in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, falls into this trap, the very position of enunciation of the subject whose mind ‘reflects’ matter) and the assertion ‘there is nothing which is not matter’ (which, with its other side, ‘non-All’ is matter,’ opens up the space for the explanation of immaterial phenomena).

In this perspective a genuine materialism has nothing to do with the assertion proposed by many materialists, including it seems the Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, of a ‘fully existent external reality’, or the ‘inert density of matter’ (MC 92).<sup>160</sup> Rather, genuine materialism is a position which accepts the ontological ‘nothingness’ or ‘void’, and thus the incompleteness, of reality itself (MC 92). Hence Žižek’s (MC 95) emphasis: “[...] ‘material reality is non-all’, not ‘material reality is all there is’, is the true formula of materialism.” Or, as he (MC 240) puts it elsewhere “[...] the basic axiom of today’s materialism is for me the *ontological incompleteness of reality*.” However, the drawback of ‘vulgar’ materialism is not only that it is too crude; that it in a sense is too materialist when it claims that ‘material reality is all there is’. According to Žižek (MC 92), ‘vulgar’ materialism is also not materialist enough, because it

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<sup>160</sup> Žižek’s point in his critique of Lenin’s assertion of this kind of materialism in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* is precisely that there is no place for dialectics (as that which elucidates the material genesis of the more-than-material phenomena). See Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin’s Choice,” 179.

can all too easily serve as a support for a ‘Gnostic, spiritualist obscurantism’, or simple amalgamate with idealism, as Žižek (MC 99) suggests it does in the case of cognitive scientist, David Chalmers: “So when David Chalmers proposes that the basis of consciousness will have to be found in a new, additional, fundamental – primordial and irreducible – force of nature [...] does he not thereby provide a new proof of how idealism coincides with vulgar materialism?” But why do we have this overlap? Precisely because in the end vulgar materialism and spiritual obscurantism, or in short idealism (it adds up to the same thing in Žižek’s book), presuppose the same outdated, substantialist conception of matter, conforming to the coherent, mechanistic world picture of Galileo and Newton (PV 209; see also Johnston 2007d, 8). Or in short, a conception of matter, which ignores the twentieth-century evolution of natural sciences.<sup>161</sup>

And this brings us to another of Žižek’s (IR 208-231; PV 165, 172-173, 201-203; MC 88-92) most frequent references, where he discusses how we should understand this ontological incompleteness that he sees as the most important mark of materialism, namely quantum physics. The crucial lesson of quantum physics, as well as other contemporary sciences such as neuroscience, which Žižek (PV 165) discusses thoroughly in *The Parallax View*, is that it accomplishes a desubstantializing of substance: “Quantum physics posits as the ultimate reality not some primordial elements but, rather, a kind of string of ‘vibrations’, entities which can only be described at desubstantialized processes [...]” It makes possible a conception of matter characterized by openness and contingency, or, to borrow a term from Catherine Malabou (2008, 5-6; 15-31; 68-70), which Žižek (PV 209) himself employs, by a certain ‘plasticity’. In short: A conception of matter that resonates with the incompleteness of reality. In *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek (MC 89) applies the two diverse readings of the so-called ‘principle of uncertainty’ proposed by Einstein and Heisenberg as an illustration of the contrast between an idealist position,

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<sup>161</sup> See Johnston (2007d, 8-9) for an elaboration of this point. Johnston (2008b, 107) sketches the dilemma that, according to Žižek, confronts any materialist who persists in this conception of matter, not admitting the ontological inconsistency of reality, in the following way: “Succinctly stated, if one maintains that the Real of material being isn’t barred [...], then one must either deny the existence of subjectivity [...] or regress into the crude versions of the Real-versus-Ideal dichotomy.”

which merely sees the incompleteness of our knowledge demonstrated by quantum physics as an epistemological gap, and a materialist position, which grounds this incompleteness ontologically in reality itself: “For Einstein, this principle of uncertainty proves that quantum physics does not provide a full description of reality, that there must be some unknown features missed by its conceptual apparatus. Heisenberg, Bohr, and others, on the contrary, insisted that this incompleteness of our knowledge of quantum reality indicates a strange incompleteness of quantum reality itself, a claim which leads to a breathtakingly weird ontology.” Thus, when Žižek talks about ‘incompleteness’ he is not merely referring to our knowledge of the world, but the world itself. Or, as he (TTS 158) formulates it in *The Ticklish Subject*: “[...] what looks like an *epistemological limitation* of our capacity to grasp reality [...] is the positive *ontological condition* of reality itself.” In other words, there is a split or gap in reality itself, a gap or a void inherent in being, so to speak. Drawing an explicit parallel in *The Monstrosity of Christ* to quantum physics, Žižek (MC 90) seems to suggest that this is precisely also the point of Badiou’s ontology of pure multiplicity; that is, an ontology in which being, as a consequence of the non-existence of the one, is nothing but multiplicities of multiplicities with no end point, or rather, as Badiou puts it: “The end point is of necessity also a multiplicity.” Namely, as he clarifies: “The multiplicity which is the multiplicity of no multiplicity at all, the thing is also nothing: the void, the empty multiplicity, the empty set.”<sup>162</sup> So, for Badiou there is indeed a gap or a void inherent to being itself.

Considering that it is supposedly the essential materialist feature, it might come as a surprise that according to Žižek (TTS 55) it was Kant who was the first to recognize the inconsistency or incompleteness of reality, namely in terms of our failure to grasp the whole of being. This is why Žižek (TTS 38-39) asserts that there is a materialist aspect in Kant’s transcendental idealism (in fact in German Idealism as such), and even that: “The only consistent materialist position is that the world does not exist – in the Kantian sense of the term, as a self-enclosed whole” (CWZ 97).<sup>163</sup> But Žižek (TTS 55) also argues that Kant

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<sup>162</sup> Badiou, “Towards a New Concept of Existence,” 65-66. See also *Being and Event* meditation 4-5.

<sup>163</sup> It is against the backdrop of his recognition of this incompleteness that we should understand Žižek’s (PV 94) characterization of Kant as *the*



did not go far enough in his transcendental turn in that he did *not* recognize that “[...] the limitation of our knowledge [...] is simultaneously the limitation of the very object of our knowledge, that is, the gaps and voids in our knowledge of reality are simultaneously the gaps and voids in the ‘real’ ontological edifice itself.” Only Hegel recognized this. Indeed, this recognition consists in Žižek’s (TTS 55; cf. PV 27) view precisely in “[...] the crucial Hegelian gesture of transposing epistemological limitation into ontological fault.” Or, as he (FTNK xxix; cf. PV 25) proposes elsewhere: “Is not this shift also the shift from Kant to Hegel? From tension between phenomena and Thing to an inconsistency/gap between phenomena themselves?”<sup>164</sup> In relation to the example of quantum physics we might thus say, metaphorically speaking, that Einstein’s interpretation of the ‘principle of uncertainty’ is still too ‘Kantian’, whereas only the interpretation presented by Heisenberg and Bohr is fully ‘Hegelian’. What is most important to note in this context, however, is that according to Žižek (MC 259) this passage from Kant to Hegel, from the gap between immanence and transcendence to the minimal gap in immanence itself, from external to inherent limitation, also constitutes ‘the passage from idealism to materialism’. As we shall see in the

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philosopher of freedom. On the basis of a passage from *Critique of Practical Reason*, in which Kant (1993, 154) claims that were we to gain access to the noumenal domain the conduct of man would be turned into mere mechanism, Žižek (TTS 25; PV 22-23) argues that Kant’s point is that our failure to grasp the whole of being is the very condition of our freedom. Interestingly, in *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek (PF 105-106) appoints the occasionalism of Malebranche as the forerunner of Kant in this respect insofar as Malebranche’s main argument for his occasionalism is that “[...] if divine causality were to become directly observable, this would make us slaves of God and change God in to a horrifying tyrant (this idea was later taken up by Kant, in his notion that it is only our epistemological limitation – our ignorance of noumenal causality – which makes us free moral beings).”

<sup>164</sup> One of the essential consequences of this ‘ontologicalization’ of incompleteness, this passage from Kant to Hegel, is, as outlined very clearly by Johnston (2008b, 143), an inversion of the relationship between noumenal and phenomenal, transcendence and immanence: “So the immanence of phenomenal reality isn’t ‘not all’ because of the withdrawal of a transcendent noumenal being; on the contrary, a transcendent noumenal being is posited precisely because the immanence of phenomenal reality is ‘not-all’. In Žižek’s view, a core component of his own philosophical materialism is this inversion of idealism’s prioritization of transcendence over immanence.”

next section, this difference between epistemological and ontological incompleteness is at the very heart of Žižek's criticism of Badiou.<sup>165</sup>

To sum up, we can say that for Badiou and Žižek materialism must split in a double sense. First, materialism is split in the sense that both Badiou and Žižek claim that we are in an urgent need of a materialism which is capable of opposing not only a classical idealism, but rather, and more importantly, another branch of materialism. Furthermore, both Badiou and Žižek claim that the materialism that they propose is a non-reductive materialism, which in contrast to the kind of 'vulgar' materialism that they both oppose, is capable of accounting for important, immaterial phenomenon such as subjectivity and freedom. Second, for both Badiou and Žižek, genuine materialism is characterized by a 'spilt' in the sense that they both base their materialism on the idea of some sort of ontological gap or void, an incompleteness of reality, following from the acceptance of the non-existence of the One/big Other.

This, and the other similarities outlined above, not to mention Žižek's numerous endorsing comments on Badiou, might have left the impression that Badiou and Žižek are more or less in full agreement with each other, not only on the issue of what a genuine materialism looks like, but also on the basic ontological traits of such a materialism. But, as we shall see in the following section, this agreement is indeed only apparent.

### **Kantian Trouble ...**

For more than a decade now, Žižek has carried on a detailed and multifaceted discussion of numerous aspects of Badiou's work, such as Badiou's critique of postmodernism, his engagement with Lacan, his reading of Paul, and his conception of politics – just to mention some of the most imperative and determining issues. Yet even though Žižek has been among Badiou's most positive and eager advocates, and no doubt one of his most competent readers, he has also been one of Badiou's harshest

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<sup>165</sup> Against this backdrop, the following remark made by Žižek (OB 89) in *On Belief* becomes highly relevant for the present discussion: "At the level of theology this shift from external to inherent limitation is accomplished by Christianity." Žižek is here referring to the 'materialist' shift from the external gap in Judaism between man and God as the sublime, absolute Other to the inherent gap in God himself in Christianity. I will return to this important issue in my discussion of Žižek's understanding of incarnation in the last section of this chapter.

critics.<sup>166</sup> This critique is itself many-sided and complex, concerning, for example, disagreements on the Freudian notion of ‘death drive’ (TTS 159-161; PV 110; IDLC 394-395) and the Lacanian notion of the Real (FTKN lxxxi-lxxxviii), criticism of Badiou’s separation of politics from state and economy (Žižek 2001, 270-272; PV 324-328; IDLC 399-412), quarrels about diverging notions of the subject (TTS 158-162), accusations that Badiou’s notion of event is modelled on the religious idea of miracle (TTS 136; Žižek 2001, 325), and so on. However, as implied by Žižek himself and convincingly demonstrated by Johnston (2007a; 2007b), there is also a persistent core in this critique, namely the recurrent assertion of a deep-rooted ‘Kantianism’ at the heart of Badiou’s philosophical system, which seems to constitute the common source of more or less all these aspects criticized by Žižek. More precisely, Žižek (TTS 166; OWB 107; CWZ 137; PV 56) consistently locates this Kantianism, or Kantian aspect of Badiou’s philosophy, in the latter’s fundamental differentiation between being and event.

This gap between being and event, between what is and what ‘happens’, does indeed constitute, as Žižek (TTS 128) notes, the elemental axis of Badiou’s mature philosophical system. Following Clement and Feltham (2004, 9), we can say that Badiou’s most fundamental ontological term is ‘situation’. In Badiou’s ontology, everything is thus perceived as a ‘situation’. Even ontology (the discourse on being qua being) itself, Badiou (BE 25) maintains, must be thought of as a situation.<sup>167</sup> Badiou (E 25; cf. BE 24) defines a ‘situation’ as “[...] a multiple composed of an infinity of elements, each one of which is itself a multiple.” Or to put it in the language of set theory: a situation is the (infinite) elements that belong to a given set (e.g. the set of rational numbers, or the set of university students). Moreover, any multiplicity presented in a situation is also always ‘structured’, which simply means that it is presented according to

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<sup>166</sup> Johnston (2007b; 2007a) presents an exhaustive examination of Žižek’s critique of Badiou in his two articles – “There is Truth, and then there is truths—or, Slavoj Žižek as a Reader of Alain Badiou” and “From the Spectacular Act to the Vanishing Act: Badiou, Žižek, and the Politics of Lacanian Theory” – upon which I draw in the following.

<sup>167</sup> In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou uses the term ‘world’ synonymously with situation, or rather, this shift in terminology is part of Badiou reworking of the concept of situation. I will keep to the conception of the situation outlined in *Being and Event*, since this is the conception that Žižek’s critique is based on.

a consistent process of unification. What structures the situation is a series of measures and operations that determine or identify what belongs and what does not belong to the situation, by counting multiplicities as elements of the situation. This is what enables an element to count as a member in a given situation (e.g. to count as a rational number, or to count as a university student). So in one sense the situation is simply the result of this structuring operation, which Badiou (BE 24) also calls the ‘count-as-one’. Defined in this way, a situation can always only present its elements as what Badiou (BE 25) calls ‘consistent multiplicity’, that is, as *one* or *a* coherent element. However, since this consistency or unity is the result of a (counting) operation, and not an inherent ontological feature, it retroactively implies that there is something upon which this operation operates, something prior to the counting operation, which is not itself unified or structured – in other words, something which is inconsistent. As Badiou (BE 25) points out, the counting operation thus splits the multiple in two, which is to say, into ‘consistent multiplicity’ and ‘inconsistent multiplicity’. But all that can be presented of inconsistent multiplicity in a situation is what counts for nothing according to the measures of this situation, or what Badiou (BE 55) terms ‘the void’; and thus all that we can ever know of being is presented to us as unified or consistent multiplicity. In summary: although what holds for being qua being, according to Badiou’s (BE 23; TW 227) most fundamental claim, is that ‘the one is not’, that ‘there is no whole’, the world as we experience and know it, being in terms of a situation, is nevertheless normally presented as consistent, that is, as unified and whole, and thus stable and predictable.

However, it may happen from time to time in a site of structural weakness in a situation, and in an entirely contingent and unpredictable way, inaccessible to the knowledge of the situation, that an event takes place, and in a flash implies the inconsistency of being as the void at the heart of every situation. Since the event occurs in a completely contingent and unpredictable way, it cannot be reduced to or deduced from the situation in which it occurs – it emerges out of nothing so to speak. Neither can the event be proved, known or accounted for in terms of the situation. It has no ontological guarantee; “There is no acceptable ontological matrix of the event” (BE 190). The event is always, as Badiou puts it (BE 181), ‘undecidable’ from the standpoint of the situation, in relation to knowledge, and can

therefore also always be denied by those who believe only in the bare facts of the situation: was it really a political revolution, or just a simple outburst of disorder and crime? An amorous encounter, or simple sexual desire? This undecidability of the event is due to the fact it has always-already disappeared the moment that it happens; strictly speaking we never encounter an event in the present moment, ‘now’, it is always only recognized as such retrospectively, through the act of deciding to name it an event. The event “[...] can only be revealed in the retroaction of an interventional practice [...]” (BE 178). Another way to put this is to say that an event can only be identified from a subjective engaged position. Moreover, the implications of the event, the void it manifests in the situation, is maintained and unfolded solely through the interventions of the subjects who are faithful to it and who hereby may perhaps, step by step, devise a new way of reordering the terms of the situation that will make legible what they truly are.<sup>168</sup> The consequence of all this is, to put it in the words of Badiou (BE 190), that: “[...] ontology has nothing to say about the event.” Rather, this is the job of philosophy. This kind of philosophy, which asserts that a wholly contingent and unpredictable event can take place in spite of the order of being, indeed emerging out of nothing but this very order, is what Badiou (SP 66) in his book on Paul describes as a ‘materialism of grace’.

It is against this background of what Žižek (TTS 166) considers to be an absolute separation of being and event in Badiou’s philosophy that we should understand his repeatedly stated claim that: “[...] although Badiou is adamantly anti-Kantian [...] at a deeper level his distinction between the order of the positive Knowledge of Being and the wholly different Truth-Event, remains Kantian.” In *The Parallax View*, Žižek resumes and develops this critique of Badiou, incorporating it into his underlying discussion of the confrontation between materialism and idealism, arguing that precisely because of his distinction between being and event, Badiou remains stuck within, or perhaps rather regresses into, the domain of idealism.

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<sup>168</sup> Badiou’s examples of this process are numerous, counting the French revolution, Georg Cantor’s invention of set theory and Arnold Schönberg’s creation of atonal music. But, as pointed out by Žižek (TTS 141; PD 174) and others (Critchley 2000, 21; Dews 2004, 110), Badiou’s best and in any case most well-developed exemplification of the truth-event is probably presented in his reading of the Pauline epistles.

Later in the same book, in a short but very enlightening comparative discussion of the different notions of the event in Heidegger, Deleuze and Badiou, Žižek (PV 166) once again repeats his critique of this ‘Kantian’ distinction in Badiou’s philosophy, and moreover suggests that the conception of the event constitutes a new significant battlefield of materialism and idealism:

Badiou, on the contrary [to Deleuze], asserts the radical ‘dualism’ between Event and the order of being. It is here, on this terrain, that we should locate today’s struggle between idealism and materialism: idealism posits an ideal Event which cannot be accounted for in terms of its material (pre)conditions, while the materialist wager is that we can get ‘behind’ the event and explore how Event explodes out of the gap in/of the order of Being.

It is worth noticing that Žižek’s distinction in this quote between an idealist and a materialist notion of the event is based on the claim that even though an event is an immaterial phenomenon, we are nevertheless able to account for its ontological preconditions. Failing to present such an account, and thus failing to account for the ontological status of the event, is in Žižek’s view equal to backsliding into idealism, which, as he clearly implies, is what he thinks happens in Badiou’s case.<sup>169</sup> However, as Žižek (PV 167) does indeed acknowledge immediately after proposing this critique, Badiou is in fact well aware of the kind of idealist danger that lurks in his rigorous separation of being and event. In a revised version of the small text “L’événement comme trans-être”, in what overtly appears to be an attempt to guard himself from exactly these kind of accusations, Badiou (TW 100-101) emphasizes how he actually counterbalances the distinction between being and event with his concept of the ‘evental site’:

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<sup>169</sup> To complicate matters further, Žižek is not completely consistent in his stance toward Badiou’s notion of the event. Thus, in some of his earlier texts, first of all *On Belief* (OB 112) and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (PD 134-135), he refers to Badiou’s notion of the event in a way that cannot but appear as if he fully embraces it. As argued by Johnston (2007a, 13), one way to explain this apparent self-contradiction would be to read Žižek’s later critique of Badiou as part of a process of self-critique. Indeed, after the publication of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* in 2003, Žižek has actually been more consistently critical in his stance.

It is necessary to point out that as far as its material is concerned, the event is not a miracle. What I mean is that what composes an event is always extracted from the situation, always related back to a singular multiplicity, to its state, to the language connected to it, etc. In fact if we want to avoid lapsing into an obscurantist theory of creation *ex nihilo*, we must accept that an event is nothing but a part of a given situation, nothing but a *fragment of being*. I have called this fragment of being the evental site.<sup>170</sup>

But this attempt on Badiou's part to ward off idealist suspicions of a miraculous or magical creation 'ex nihilo', by referring to the immanent location of the event in terms of the 'evental site' and by designating the 'materiality' of this site as a 'fragment of being', does not nevertheless solve the problem in Žižek's view. It merely displaces it. Because even if we accept Badiou's description of the evental site as a 'fragment of being', there is, as Žižek (CWZ 136) explains in the following remark from one of his conversations with Glyn Daly, in any case still an abyss between the evental site, and the event:

We have a similar point with Badiou, where the idea is that event is something that emerges out of nothing. You have in the positive reality of being what Badiou calls *site événementielle*, the potential site of the event, but the event is, as it were, an abyssal self-grounded autonomous act. You cannot derive that event from or reduce it to some order of being.

Actually, Badiou (PS 71) himself, sometimes quite overtly, confirms this portrayal, for instance in this passage from *Saint Paul*: "[...] the event's sudden emergence never follows from the existence of an evental site. Although it requires conditions of immanence, that sudden emergence nevertheless remains of the order of grace." Thus, Žižek's critical reservation is in no way completely unjustified. Despite this, Žižek (PV 167) acknowledges, as he makes clear in his discussion of the event in

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<sup>170</sup> Let me just note that this quote is part of a piece of text (one page or so) that was not part of the original text published in *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire* in 1998, and that the issue that Badiou (TW 100) addresses in this piece of text, which was added to the English translation published in *Theoretical Writings* from 2004, is precisely the question of: "What are the characteristic traits of the event, at least within the register of thing of being?" This revision might thus be read as an answer from Badiou to the accusations of the miraculous or ex nihilo character of his conception of the event proposed by Žižek (TTS 135), and in particular Bensaïd (2001), in the period just previous to the publication of *Theoretical Writings*.

*The Parallax View*, that on Badiou's terms, "[...] an Event is *nothing but* its own inscription into the order of Being, a cut/rupture in the order of Being on account of which Being can never form a consistent All." But in Žižek's view this is still a too idealist, not materialist enough, conception of the event. In a passage from *The Parallax View*, in which he comments directly on the above quotation from Badiou's text on the event as trans-being, Žižek (PV 167) therefore insists that concerning the question of the conception of the event: "[...] we should go a step further than Badiou is ready to go: there is no Beyond of Being which inscribes itself into the order of Being—there is nothing but the order of Being." So what does Žižek more precisely mean by this? What does asserting that 'there is nothing but the order of being' in terms of thinking the event mean? Žižek's point seems to be once again that to really be a materialist through and through, including on the terrain of the event, one must be able to give a full account of the immanent, material preconditions, not only of the location (the site) of the event, but of the event itself. In other words, the event cannot be ontologically of some other order than being. As Žižek (CWZ 137) explains in the aforementioned conversation with Glyn Daly going over once again his critique of Badiou's conception of the event:

Now my problem with this [Badiou's] logic of event is that I am more and more convinced that it is too idealistic. In contrast, what the Lacanian notion of drives tries to account for – and this I think is maybe the ultimate materialist problem – is, to put it very simply, how an event can emerge from the order of being. How does being explode into event? Although he would reject this insinuation, I think that on this question even Badiou remains stuck in some kind of Kantian opposition between being, which is simply a deposited order of being, and the magical moment of the event of truth. The materialist problem is how to think the unity of being and event. That is to say, how does the order of being have to be structured so that something like event is possible?

In his book on Deleuze, *Organ without Bodies*, Žižek (OWB 107) takes his critique of Badiou a step further, suggesting that Badiou's distinction between being, as the concern of ontology, and event, as that which precisely cannot be addressed by ontology, is itself the result of an even more profound dualism in Badiou's philosophy, which he (TTS 130) touched upon in *The Ticklish Subject*, pointing out that in contrast to the order of



being, the event “[...] belongs to a wholly different dimension – that, precisely, of non-Being.” Due to Badiou’s identification of the event as specifically exceptional, since it is an instance of what is not being qua being, in Žižek’s opinion, he cannot but rely on a dualism between being and something otherwise than being, which is nevertheless not nothing (the event). So in other words, Žižek’s complaint does not concern Badiou’s assertion of non-being, not at all; his complaint is that Badiou in the end, not to compromise the exceptionality of the event, situates this non-being beyond being, as something other-than-being, instead of at the level of being itself.<sup>171</sup> What Žižek seems to be aiming at in his critique of Badiou seems to be the old insight that in a genuine materialism there is no room for absolute dualism, not between being and the event, not even between being and non-being.<sup>172</sup>

Against this backdrop, we can also say that the bone of contention for Žižek is, as implied in the above footnote on the question of the role of dialectics in Badiou’s philosophy, the question of what mediates between the order of being, or more precisely the evental site, and the event. Or, to phrase it in yet another way, Žižek’s materialist complaint is that Badiou’s insistence on the inexplicability of the event seems to compel

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<sup>171</sup> In a discussion of Badiou’s and Deleuze’s ontologies, Daniel W. Smith (2004, 93) proposes a similar critique: “For Deleuze, a purely immanent ontology is one in which there is nothing ‘outside’ Being or ‘otherwise’ than Being [...] Badiou [...] is forced [...] to reintroduce an element of transcendence, which appears in the form of the *event*. For Badiou, there can be no ontology of the event, since the event itself produces an ‘interruption’ in being, a ‘tear’ in its fabric: the event is supplemental’ to ontology, ‘supernumerary’.” In his book on Deleuze, Badiou himself (D 91–92) in a sense confirms these allegations of ‘transcendence’: “[...] I cannot bring myself to think that the new is a fold of the past [...]. This is why I conceptualize absolute beginnings [...] and singularities of thought that are incomparable in their constitutive gesture [...]. Deleuze always maintained that, in doing this, I fall back into transcendence and into the equivocity of analogy. But, all in all, if the only way to think a political revolution, an amorous encounter, an intervention of the sciences, or a creation of art as distinct infinities [...] is by sacrificing immanence (which I do not actually believe is the case, but that is not what matters here) and the univocity of Being, then I would sacrifice them.”

<sup>172</sup> As Johnston (2007a 10) notes in his article on Žižek’s critique of Badiou: “[...] one would claim, as Žižek insinuates, that the hallmark of materialism is a refusal to allow for the possibility of this gesture of setting apart a category of non-being beyond being, a gesture that marks the first step on the path back to idealism.”

him to uphold an unsurpassable dualism between being and event. In other words, what Žižek's critique eventually seems to imply is that Badiou ends up thinking being in terms of the masculine constitutive exception, rather than the feminine logic of not-All, that he does not really manage to uphold the incompleteness of reality and hence neither a genuine materialism. Ironically, Badiou, the anti-Kantian par excellence, seems to be reluctant towards making what Žižek describes as 'the passage from Kant to Hegel'. Regarding Hegel and the question of mediation or dialectics, this brings us to the next section, on Badiou's reading of Hegel.

### **Badiou as a Reader of Hegel**

Hegel is, in several different ways, an essential and constant point of reference in Badiou's work, all the way from his Maoist pamphlets *Théorie de la contradiction* and *De l'idéologie* in the 1970s through especially *Theory of the Subject*, but also *Being and Event* in the 1980s, up until his latest major work, *Logics of worlds*, published in 2006. Of great importance for Badiou's relationship to Hegel is the above mentioned issue of dialectical materialism, which Badiou clearly embraced in his early work until he (presumably) broke with it in *Being and Event*, only to (apparently) return to, at least some variation of it, in *Logics of worlds*.<sup>173</sup> Although Badiou's relationship to Hegel thus seems to be multifaceted, involving a certain ambiguity as well as fluctuation, the question for Badiou is not, in the words of Bruno Bosteels (2004, 156), "[...] whether Hegel should be revived, but rather which Hegel." Or, as another of Badiou's commentators declares: "[...] it remains that in Badiou's work there is no significant break with the philosophy of Hegel" (Barker 2002, 34). However, the aim here is not to offer any in depth, and much less any exhaustive, examination of the complex character of this relationship, only to examine a few rather brief instances in the course of Badiou's engagement with Hegel, in which he comments on the well-known theological themes or aspects of the latter's philosophy.<sup>174</sup> More precisely, Badiou's reading of

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<sup>173</sup> See Bruno Bosteels (2004; 2005) for a more precise account of these matters.

<sup>174</sup> Besides Sam Gillespie's (1996) article "Hegel Unsutured (An Addendum to Badiou)" and a forthcoming chapter by Bruno Bosteels in the introductory anthology *Alain Badiou: Key Concept* (Bartlett & Clemens 2010) not much work has been done, at least not to my knowledge, explicitly on Badiou's relationship to Hegel.

Hegel is of interest in the present context exclusively in terms of a possible link, in light of the fact that Badiou follows Lenin in a ‘materialist reading’ of Hegel,<sup>175</sup> between materialism and theology.

### *Materialist Dialectic*

In a few rather condensed paragraphs in the first part of *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou explicitly comments on a key theological aspect of Hegel’s philosophy, namely the Trinitarian character of his dialectic.<sup>176</sup> To get a better grip on and to understand what is at stake on these pages, it is necessary to start out with a close examination of their immediately preceding context.<sup>177</sup> Badiou begins his discussion in *Theory of the Subject* with a remarkable reading of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, claiming that we need to identify and distinguish between two dialectical matrices in Hegel. An idealist dialectic of alienation in which “[...] the idea of a simple term which unfolds itself in its becoming-other, in order to come back to itself as an achieved concept” and a materialist dialectic of scission in which “[...] there is no unity that is not split” (TS 4). So, whereas the first dialectic has a simple or an un-split term as its starting point, the second begins with a split term. Badiou names this second materialist dialectic, ‘dialectic of scission’. After this initial division of Hegel, Badiou presents a detailed account of the three fundamental elements or stages in the second Hegelian dialectic, which he labels

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<sup>175</sup> As Lenin (1963, 104) famously states in his *Philosophical Notebooks*: “I am in general trying to read Hegel materialistically: Hegel is materialism which has been stood on its head (according to Engels) – that is to say, I cast aside for the most part God, the Absolute, the Pure Idea, etc.”

<sup>176</sup> However, already on the very first pages of the book, Badiou (TS 4-5) makes the following interesting link between Hegel and theology: “Already with the Church Fathers, those great founders of conceptual history, it was necessary to account for the fact that God, the absolute form of the One, was able to pulverize a universe of such lasting multiplicity. [...] Hegel is the modern conjurer of this ecclesiastical question. Instead of saying that there is creation of the Whole by the One, Hegel will show that the Whole is the history of the One, so that the space of the multiple is the effect of the time required for the concept.”

<sup>177</sup> The overall task, which I will not go further into here, that Badiou sets out to accomplish in *Theory of the Subject* is, in short, to provide Marxism with a materialist and dialectical philosophy able to match its political programme, which, Badiou argues (against Althusser and by the help of Lacan), implies a concept of the subject. See Bosteels (2009) for a lucid introduction.

‘scission’, ‘determination’ (of the split term) and ‘limit’ (of determination).

In his remarks on ‘something’ in the first chapter of *Science of Logic*, Hegel does not, according to Badiou (TS 5), begin with ‘something’, but rather with a difference. More precisely, the ‘minimal difference’, between ‘something’ (*Etwas*) and something ‘other’ (*Anderes*), established by Hegel (1989, 82-90) through the operation in the beginning of the chapter, where being and nothing are the same thing posited twice. Since this minimal difference is established by a repetition, it has, as Badiou (TS 6) notes, no ‘qualitative support’: “*This* only differs from *that* by the statement of the difference, by the literal placement. [...] There is A, and there is Ap (read: ‘A as such’ and ‘A in another place’, namely the place p distributed by the space of placement, or P).”<sup>178</sup> However, the important insight of Hegel is that everything exists as split in itself between ‘something’ (*Etwas*) and something ‘other’ (*Anderes*); or, in Badiou’s terminology, every ‘force’ exists as split between something ‘as such’ (A) and something ‘in another place’ (Ap). In short, what Hegel demonstrates is, as Badiou states, that: “We must thus posit a constitutive scission:  $A = (AAp)$ .”<sup>179</sup> It is the same kind of inherent scission that Badiou (TC 55-56) has in mind when he, in *The Century*, refers to the ‘minimal difference’ between the geometrical figure and background in Kasimir Malevich’s painting, *White on White*. Such a constitutive scission is, according to Badiou, the starting point of any genuine dialectic. From here Badiou moves on to the second aspect of the dialectical movement: the question of ‘determination’, i.e. the question of what determines the split force. As implied in the above, it is not ‘something as such’ (A) that determines what something ( $A=AAp$ ) is; rather, this is determined by the effect of ‘space of placement’ (P) on ‘something as such’ (A). Or, in

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<sup>178</sup> It should be noted that, Badiou (TS 6) underlines that ‘space of placement’ is to be understood not only in a spatial, but in a temporal sense as well.

<sup>179</sup> To make this point, Badiou often refers to Mao’s dictum: ‘One divides into two’. However, this ‘two’ has nothing to do with any kind of dualism. Rather, for both Hegel and Badiou, the twosome designates that the one is split from within, not between two parts, but between something and nothing. The ‘other’ (*anderes*), or in Badiou’s (TS 5-7) case ‘the space of placement’, is not ‘something’, but strictly speaking ‘nothing’. Thus, as Badiou (NN 19) says elsewhere: “[...] no Hegelian [...] would admit the universal validity of the principle of identity.”

Badiou's words: "Now, Hegel says that what determines the split term, what gives it its singularity of its existence, is not of course A, the generic term closed in on itself. It is rather  $A_p$ , A according to the effect or the whole into which it is inscribed." The algorithm for the process of determination, the placement of a force and its resulting division, is thus:  $A_p(A)$ . The third aspect of the Hegelian materialist dialectic is described by Badiou (TS 11) as the 'determination of the determination'. This is the counter-process, which limits the process of determination. And more precisely "[...] a process of torsion, by which a force reapplies itself to that from which it conflictually emerges (TS 11)." It is the process in which a force is able to turn its inner scission against itself and twist, or force, its way through the impasse of its own structural placement, thus limiting and exceeding the process of its determination (TS 11-12). The algorithm of this counter-process is:  $A(A_p)$ . As the reader of *Theory of the Subject* will learn during the further course of the book, this is the (rare) process through which a subject comes in to being.

Finally, Badiou also describes how the dialectical process might trigger – as a reaction – two extreme forms of relapses. The first is a deviation 'to the right', which in a return to the established order, claims that 'nothing really took place but the place', and thus denying the limitation of determination via the torsion of the force, or, as Badiou (TS 12) says, "[...] the possibility of the new inherent in the old." The schema for this 'rightist' deviation, which Badiou (TS 206) terms 'mechanist materialism', is  $A_p(A_p) = P$ . The second is a deviation 'to the left', which as 'a radicalism of novelty' asserts the absolute and intact purity of the original force, and thus "[...] denying, so to speak, the old inherent in the new, that is, determination." The schema for this 'leftist' deviation, which Badiou (TS 206) names 'dynamicist materialism', is  $A(A) = A$ . Badiou illustrates these two relapses via a reference to the two major heresies that marked the early history of the Christian church (or perhaps even, as Badiou suggests, the entire history of Christianity). Namely 'rightist' Arianism, in which Christ is perceived as wholly human (pure P), and 'leftist' Gnosticism, in which Christ is perceived as wholly divine (pure A). Badiou ends his excursion into the history of the Church with praise for Hegel, because, according to Badiou (TS 17), Hegel precisely helps us to establish a rule of orthodoxy (dialectical materialism) against

both of these relapses into the illusions of purity. As we shall see, this is advice that Badiou himself does not always seem to persist in.

### *Hegel's Theological Model*

After his careful outline of the threefold dialectical movement of 'scission', 'determination' and 'limitation', Badiou illustrates, in the following section of the book, how the implicit model of this Hegelian dialectic is in fact Christian theology. Hence, Badiou (TS 15) begins his analysis of Hegel's theological model by identifying 'the principle of incarnation' as that, which establishes the 'split term' and thus the starting point of the aforementioned dialectic of scission. Incarnation is, in Badiou's vocabulary, that which provides a dialectical meaning to an otherwise meaningless or contradictory duality of the finite and the infinite:

What gives it [the contradictory duality between the finite and the infinite] meaning is its historicization in scission, which makes the infinite ex-sist in the finite. Therein lies the necessary stroke of genius of Christianity. For this to happen, God (A) is indexed (Ap) as specific out-place of the splace of the finite: this is the principle of the Incarnation. God becomes man. God divides into himself (the Father) and himself-placed-in-the-finite (the Son).<sup>180</sup>

This is, as Badiou (TS 16) expresses it, the point of scission that the Council of Nicea will settle "[...] in the well-known dialectical axiom: 'The Son is consubstantial with the Father'."<sup>181</sup> As indicated in the above quotation, Badiou's attitude towards this 'dialectical axiom' of incarnation appears here to be rather sympathetic. Something that he seems to reaffirm in *Being and Event*, where he, illustrating his suggestion (in meditation twenty-one) that all the parameters of his doctrine

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<sup>180</sup> 'Out-place' (horlieu) and 'splace' (esplace) are two neologisms coined by Badiou. 'Horlieu' is a contraction of 'hors-lieu'. By 'out-place' we should, according to the translator of *Theory of the Subject*, understand something like "[...] 'out of place' or off-site', as when someone is *hors-jeu*, off-side, in soccer" (Bosteels 2009, xxxii). 'Esplace' is a contraction of 'espace de placement' (space of placement) and, again according to the translator, "It can be understood as a near-synonym for 'structure' or even 'symbolic order', even though there is no strict parallelism with either Althusser or Lacan (Bosteels 2009, xxxi).

<sup>181</sup> Badiou is of course here referring to 'ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρὶ' in the second article of the Nicene Creed.

of the event are actually present in Christianity, conspicuously underlines that:

The ultimate essence of the evental ultra-one is the Two, in the especially striking form of a division of the divine One – the Father and the Son – which, in truth, definitively ruins any recollection of divine transcendence into the simplicity of a Presence (BE 212).

It is somehow hard not to take this statement as an indication on Badiou's behalf that the figure of incarnation holds a potential in terms of thinking through the particular mode of (trans-)being of the event (the ultra-one) as 'an unfounded multiple'. Yet, as we shall see in the following section, by the time of *Saint Paul*, not only is any such indication excluded by the fact that Badiou here links the event exclusively to the resurrection, but whatever sympathies Badiou might have had towards the incarnation have evidently vaporized completely. Nevertheless, in *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou lingers on in the theological terminology, describing the other two aspects or stages of the Hegelian dialectical process in the following way. The second dialectical stage [...] designates the determination of the (infinite) identity of God by marking in the splace of the finite. The radicality of this determination is the Passion: God *qua* Son dies" (TS 16). And the third stage [...] designates the counter-determination (the limit of death) by the infinity of the Father: the Son is resurrected and rejoins (Ascension) the Father's bosom, which represents a figurative outplace" (TS 16). So, to sum up, the implicit theological content of 'scission', 'determination' and 'limit' is incarnation (the consubstantiality of the infinite and the finite), the passion (the death of the finite) and resurrection (the non-death of the infinite).

Concerning the outcome of this dialectical movement, this is where Badiou's rather short-lived theological enthusiasm ends and his critique of Hegel begins: "At the end of this redemptive adventure, you find in heaven a God who reconciles in himself, in his historical self-unfolding, the finite and the infinite. And on earth, what subsists is only the simple empty trace of the complete process [...]." In short, Hegel's (supposedly) materialist dialectic, modelled on theology, is ultimately a *circular* movement, in which the end point does not exceed, but leads right back to the starting point, and thus the dialectical process does nothing but return us to status quo, to 'the right side

of the Father'.<sup>182</sup> In Badiou's reading, Hegel's potentially materialist dialectic thus relapses back into idealism. And so, Badiou (TS 18) insists that: "Hegel [...] must be divided once again." This time between a dialectic of *circularity*, which despite commencing in a materialist manner with a 'split' term, on account of its Trinitarian urge to integrate or 'reconcile' this split term back into a redemptive Absolute, ends in idealism, and a materialist dialectic of *periodization*, which has the same starting point, but proceeds in terms of a spiralled movement, rather than moving in circles, and thus does not lead back to anything. At this point in the book, Badiou takes leave (at least for a little while) from Hegel to focus on the elaboration of such a materialist dialectic of periodization: "Hegel has been given the proper salute, for us to take things up again from zero. For we must think periodization through to the end" (TS 21).

*Badiou's (Mis)reading of the Negation of the Negation*

Yet Hegel returns for a brief, but remarkable, appearance at the end of part one of *Theory of the Subject* where Badiou suggests that he reveals, in a short well-known passage at the end of *Logic of Science* in which he implies that a genuine dialectics requires a fourth term, that he in fact did have an intuition of a proper materialist dialectic of periodization. More precisely, Badiou (TS 48) designates this materialist intuition of Hegel's in the following way: "To count the negative (or difference), which is the very principle of contradiction, not as simple universal, but as Two, and thus to establish the period as quadruple: such is the materialist intuition at the supreme point of Hegel's *Logic*." In other words, with his brief consideration of a period of quadruplicity, rather than a triplicity, Hegel was on the right materialist track of a 'spiralled' dialectic. Yet according to Badiou (TS 48), this intuition of Hegel's is unfortunately at once annulled by the 'obsessive' (Trinitarian) theme of the circular return to the beginning, or in other words, the insistence on reconciliation instead of a double scission. Although this short excursion back into the Hegelian dialectic was clearly meant as a

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<sup>182</sup> This 'return of the Father' is, as we shall see in the next section, an important reason why Badiou, in his book on Paul, rejects Hegel's reading of the Christ-event. As Badiou (SP 43) underscores, Paul's 'discourse of the Son' "[...] can only be accomplished through a sort of decline of the figure of the Master [Father]." According to Badiou (SP 42) the figure of the Master characterizes the Greek and Jewish discourse, both of which he explicitly designates 'discourses of the Father'.



closing remark by Badiou, this insight into Hegel's 'materialist moment' seems to raise more questions than answers. Questions like: Did Badiou perhaps give up on Hegel too soon? Is another reading, not only of Hegel, but also his underlying theological model, perhaps possible? A reading, which is closer to the true materialist dialectic that 'counts negativity twice' as Badiou suggests?

It is quite clear that Badiou's main quarrel with Hegel's dialectic concerns the conceptualization of its third moment, the 'determination of determination', or, in Hegelian terms the 'negation of the negation'. Even if Badiou (TS 48), as we have just seen, acknowledges the potential for another, more materialist, reading of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, he eventually concludes that Hegel's dialectic remains circular and therefore idealist. In other words, Badiou adheres to a reading of the Hegelian 'negation of the negation' or 'sublation' (*Aufhebung*) as an annulment of negativity, which, in theological terms, institutes a reconciliation of the Father and the Son as the (Absolute) endpoint, rather than sustaining an ongoing (spiralled) process of scission. As Oliver Feltham (2008, 73) implies in his introduction to Badiou's philosophy, Badiou's reading in *Theory of the Subject* here echoes Mao's rejection of the Hegelian notion of 'negation of the negation' in the polemics that he advances against Engels in *Practice and Contradiction*.<sup>183</sup> There is certainly nothing surprising in this, since Mao is a key reference, not only in *Theory of the Subject*, but in all of the preceding works that Badiou published during the 1970s (see Bosteels 2005b).

This link is nevertheless not without some interest in the present context, if we take into consideration the critical reading

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<sup>183</sup> Mao (Tse-Tung 2007, 181) articulates his critique in the following way: "Engels talked about the three categories, but as for me I don't believe in two of those categories. (The unity of opposites is the most basic law, the transformation of quality and quantity into one another is the unity of the opposites quality and quantity, and the negation of the negation does not exist at all). [...] There is no such thing as the negation of the negation. Affirmation, negation, affirmation, negation ... in the development of things, every link in the chain of events is both affirmation and negation. Slave-holding society negated primitive society, but with reference to feudal society it constituted, in turn, the affirmation. Feudal society constituted the negation in relation to slave-holding society but it was in turn the affirmation with reference to capitalist society. Capitalist society was the negation in relation to feudal society, but it is, in turn, the affirmation in relation to socialist."

of Mao's *Practice and Contradiction* proposed by Žižek in his recent major work *In Defence of Lost Causes* from 2008. The centre or key target of Žižek's critique is precisely Mao's rejection of Hegel's 'negation of the negation'. According to Žižek (IDLC 185), Mao was right in rejecting the standard notion of 'dialectical synthesis' ('negation of the negation') as 'reconciliation of opposites', but he was very wrong in formulating this rejection in terms of an ontology of 'eternal struggle of opposites', because this will in Žižek's (IDLC 185) view get him tangled up in the non-dialectical notion of 'bad infinity' (i.e. the infinite reduced to an endless succession of finite elements). Mao opposes continued division, or scission, of his dialectic of contradiction to 'dialectical synthesis' of the Hegelian 'negation of the negation', but by doing this he fails, in Žižek's (IDLC 191) eyes, "[...] to grasp how the 'negation of the negation' is not a compromise between a position and its excessively radical negation, but, on the contrary, the only true negation. And it is because Mao is unable to theoretically formulate this self-relating negation of form itself that he gets caught in the 'bad infinity' of endless negating, scissions into two, subdivision..." How then does Žižek, more precisely, understand the 'negation of the negation' as the 'only true negation'? This is actually one of the essential concerns in Žižek's (SOI 7) persistent attempt, announced in his very first (English-language) book, "[...] to reactualize Hegelian dialectics by giving it a new reading on the basis of Lacanian psychoanalysis", and it is therefore also a constantly recurring issue in Žižek's work.<sup>184</sup> In brief, the essential message of Žižek's many variations on this theme, is, that the Hegelian notion of 'negation of the negation' should be read, not as a transition to a higher third stage of a synthesis that 'sublates' or 'reconciles' all differences and negativity, but rather as a repetition and radicalization of the first negation (the antithesis) that will shatter the very framework in which the first negation is negation and thus in a certain sense no longer appear as a negation (SOI 176; FTKN 30-33 + 186; TN 120-124; TTS 70-75

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<sup>184</sup> It is probably evident by now that Žižek's Hegel does not exactly fit the orthodox picture of Hegel. In short, one could, in the words of Johnston (2007d, 5), say that: "Žižek's Hegel is the exact opposite of what he usually is conceived to be—not an idealist metaphysician of the all-consuming conceptual synthesis of a thereby totalized reality, but, instead, a materialist thinker of (in Lacanese) a not-All Real shot through with antagonisms, cracks, fissures, and tensions."

+ 85-85). Or, in Žižek's (IDLC 189) own words: "After all, what is the Hegelian 'negation of the negation'? First, the old order is negated within its own ideologico-political form; then, this form itself has to be negated." Against the backdrop of this reading of 'negation of the negation', Žižek (IDLC 194) very instructively summarizes what he takes to be the problematic political consequence of Mao's rejection of this notion:

His problem was precisely the absence of the 'negation of the negation,' the failure of the attempts to transpose revolutionary negativity into a truly new positive order: all temporary stabilizations of the revolution amounted to just so many restorations of the old order, so that the only way to keep the revolution alive was the 'spurious infinity' of endlessly repeated negation which reached its apex in the Great Cultural Revolution.

Though Žižek does mention Badiou more than once in the course of his critique of Mao, he does not at this point explicitly relate his critique of Mao to Badiou. However, later on in the book, in a section dedicated to Badiou's politics, Žižek (IDLC 407) raises Badiou's understanding of the 'negation of the negation', not as outlined in *Theory of the Subject*, but with reference to a recent interview with Badiou in which he declares that: "Contrary to Hegel, for whom the negation of the negation produces a new affirmation, I think we must assert that today negativity, properly speaking, does not create anything new. It destroys the old, of course, but does not give rise to a new creation."<sup>185</sup> According to Žižek (IDLC 408) this rejection of Hegel will lead Badiou to the problem of the right measure or calibration of negativity in the procedure of subtraction, which Žižek (IDLC 406-412) considers to be both a theoretical and political dead end. Instead, Žižek (IDLC 410) provocatively suggests that the Badiouian key notion of 'subtraction' should actually be read as a parallel to (his understanding of) the 'negation of the negation', and not, as Badiou himself sometimes seems to suggest, as an antipode to Hegelian dialectics. As Žižek (IDLC 410) puts it:

In this precise sense, subtraction already is the Hegelian 'negation of the negation': the first negation is a direct destruction. It violently 'negates'/destroys the positive content that it opposes within the same shared field of reality; a subtraction proper, on the contrary,

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<sup>185</sup> Badiou, "'We Need a Popular Discipline': Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative," 652.

changes the coordinates of the field itself within which the struggle is taking place.

Is this not precisely a dialectic that ‘counts negativity twice’, that is, the kind of dialectic that Badiou calls for? And if so, then perhaps Žižek can do what Badiou apparently will not, that is, provide another, more materialist, reading, not only of Hegel, but also his underlying theological model? I will return briefly to this question of Žižek’s reading of Hegel’s dialectic in the final section of this chapter. But first, let’s take a look at *Saint Paul*, and see how Badiou’s dismissal of Hegel’s (and more generally, any) dialectical reading of the Christ-event, not to mention the incarnation, gets him into a muddle that will drive him hazardously close to the kind anti-philosophical conception of the event, which he himself elsewhere fiercely renounces, and which, by Žižek’s standards, would be deemed as nothing but ill-concealed idealism.

### ***Saint Paul Revisited***

In the beginning of his book on Paul Badiou reels off a string of names of philosophers, who have previously examined the figure of Paul; hereby not only placing himself in venerable company, but also underlining that he is entering a well-trodden path. One of the predecessors mentioned by Badiou (SP 5) is Hegel. While Badiou doesn’t go into a more detailed discussion, like the one he carries out of Nietzsche’s reading of Paul, Hegel’s name nevertheless comes up a few times during the course of the book, most substantially in chapter six, entitled “The antidialectic of Death and Resurrection”. In this chapter Badiou (SP 66) attempts to ‘de-dialecticalize the Christ-event’ by demonstrating that Paul’s account of this event is in fact radically anti-dialectical. Though Badiou only refers directly to Hegel on half a page at the beginning of the chapter, where he explicitly criticizes the latter’s dialectical conception of the Christ-event, this Hegelian conception is, as the title of the chapter indicates, nevertheless the main target of Badiou’s critique throughout the chapter.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Incidentally, in *The Time that Remains*, Giorgio Agamben (2007, 100-101) also criticizes Hegel’s dialectical reading of Paul, namely for not being messianic enough. However, contrary to Badiou, Agamben (2007, 99) acknowledges that *Aufhebung*, the fundamental term of Hegelian dialectics, can be traced back (via Luther’s translation) to Paul’s use in Romans (3:31) of the Greek verb ‘katargein’. Like Badiou, Agamben (2005, 99) thus also acknowledges the theological model of Hegel’s dialectic, but in contrast to

But Badiou also criticizes Hegel in a more implicit manner, since his attempt to ‘de-dialecticalize the Christ-event’ involves purifying Paul’s position entirely from any link to the highly dialectical themes of incarnation and trinity, which are at the heart of Hegel’s philosophy. It thus seems as if a decisive displacement has occurred in Badiou’s reading of Hegel: In *Saint Paul* the issue at stake is no longer, as it was in *Theory of the Subject*, an alternative between an idealist and a materialist dialectic, but, as we will see in the following, between dialectic *tout court* and, to put it in Badiou’s Pauline terms, a ‘materialism of grace’.

The concise, but unmistakable, critique of Hegel’s dialectical conception of the Christ-event that Badiou raises on the first pages of chapter six in *Saint Paul*, has two interconnected aspects. Firstly, Badiou (SP 65) criticizes Hegel for the function that he assigns to death in his dialectic, referring to the famous passage in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on ‘tarrying with the negative’, in which Hegel (1998, 19) suggests that ‘the life of spirit is the life that withstands death’. Secondly, Badiou (SP 65) objects that, caught up in Hegel’s dialectical apparatus, the event of the resurrection just becomes a moment in the self-development of the Absolute, whereby “[...] the event as supernumerary givenness and incalculable grace is dissolved into an auto-foundational and necessary deployed rational protocol.” Whereas this second point of critique is obviously related to the critique that Badiou raised in *Theory of the Subject* against the ‘circularity’ of Hegel’s theological informed dialectic, there is no critique of death, of negativity as such, in *Theory of the Subject*. However, this ‘new’ critique raised against (Hegel’s) dialectics in *Saint Paul* is of course not new at all, but part of Badiou’s more general critique of the theme of finitude.<sup>187</sup>

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Badiou, he does not only see Hegel’s use of this model as a question of reiteration: “That Hegel’s dialectic is nothing more than a secularization of Christian theology comes as no surprise; however, more significant is the fact that (with a certain degree of irony) that Hegel uses a weapon against theology furnished by theology itself and that this weapon is genuinely messianic.” Does this not suggest that theology should be split and perhaps even split in the same way as Badiou insists on splitting Hegel in *Theory of the Subject*, that is, along the lines of idealism and materialism?

<sup>187</sup> Something which becomes particularly clear when Badiou (SP 73), in a few sentences towards the end of the chapter, brings up Heidegger: “[...] Paul is obviously not the dialectician he is sometimes taken to be. It is not a question of denying death by preserving it, but of engulfing it, abolishing it.

Against Hegel's dialectical appropriation of the Christ-event Badiou (SP 66-68) opposes what he calls Paul's anti-dialectical position, maintaining that for Paul death is in no way part of the operation of salvation, it has no redemptive function, death cannot be constitutive of the Christ-event.<sup>188</sup> What constitutes an event in Christ is solely the resurrection. The eventual grace of the resurrection is not, as Badiou (SP 66) underlines alluding to Hegel, subordinated to the 'labour of the negative' and neither can it therefore be appropriated as a moment of the Absolute; rather, grace "[...] is affirmation without preliminary negation [...]. It is pure and simple *encounter*." The point of this de-dialecticalization of the Christ-event, claims Badiou (SP 66), is that it will allow us to establish a wholly secularized 'materialism of grace' "[...] through the strong and simple idea that every existence can one day be seized by what happens to it and subsequently devote itself to that which is valid for all [...]." However, all this raises several questions. First, what is the background against which Paul's (presumably) anti-dialectical position should be understood? That is, why, more precisely, cannot death be (part of) the operation of salvation for Paul? Or to put it yet another way, what is it that leads Badiou to assert a radical dissociation between Christ's death and his resurrection? Second, what are the consequences that Badiou draws from this?

*'Death Is Not, and Can Never Be, an Event'*

To understand why Badiou, in his reading of the Pauline letters, drives a wedge between the death of Christ and the event of resurrection, we will need to take a closer look at his account of what death means and how it functions in Paul. In his exposition of the 'division of the subject, introduced in the preceding chapter (five) and developed further in the succeeding chapters, Badiou construes the Pauline opposition between life and death, and the corresponding opposition between spirit and flesh, in the following way. For Paul, this opposition of life and death, spirit and flesh, has nothing to do with the Platonic dualism of body soul and body (SP 55-56), or with the biological distinction between life and death as moments in a cycle of creation and decay (SP 68). Rather life and death, spirit and flesh, designate

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Neither is Paul, like the early Heidegger, a proponent of being-towards-death and finitude."

<sup>188</sup> As Badiou (D 77) says elsewhere: "For me [...] death is not, and can never be, an event."

two ‘subjective paths’, that is, two existential attitudes, or ways of living one’s life (SP 55-56; 68). The meaning of these two subjective stances in Paul is further illuminated by Badiou through the reading he presents in the succeeding chapters (six and seven) of *Saint Paul*. In summary, we can say that while the path of the flesh (death) is a subjective stance caught in the vicious cycle in which the law itself incites the desire of its transgression, that Paul famously describes in chapter seven in the Epistle to the Romans; the subjective stance of spirit (life) is the subjective stance, which, through fidelity to the Christ-event, is able to break out of this cycle. Sin is therefore not to break the law, but not to break *with* the law, that is, sin is to remain stuck in the vicious cycle of law-desire in which one takes pleasure in feeling guilty about one’s transgressions.<sup>189</sup> These two opposed existential attitudes, the way of the flesh and the way of the spirit, death and life, which Badiou finds in Paul, obviously match his own distinction, as outlined for instance in *Ethics* (especially E 40-57), between the human animal, the individual who is determined by his self-content life-rhythm, and the subject of truth breaking with this. And for Badiou, between these two existential attitudes there is not, and cannot be, any relationship, only a radical rupture.

Concerning the function of Christ’s death on the cross then, according to Badiou (SP 68-69), this death basically signals man’s equality to God: What Christ’s death shows is that man is not only capable of inventing death (the instituting of the vicious cycle of law and desire by Adam), but also of inventing life, of producing truth, of being true to an event and thus becoming an immortal subject of that truth-event. In short, Christ’s death simply indicates that eternal life is accessible to every human being, that anyone can be seized by the grace of a truth-event and take part in the domain of immortality. Or, in Badiou’s (SP 69) words: “The operation of death [...] constructs the site of our divine equality within humanity itself.” So, once more: it is not the death of Christ, but the resurrection alone that constitutes the event.<sup>190</sup> Death merely prepares the site for the event of

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<sup>189</sup> As Badiou (SP 72) notes, in his attempt to break with this sinful logic of enlivening self-mortification, Paul is actually close to his great detractor, Nietzsche. In his *Genealogy of Morals* the latter describes a similar logic of vitalizing mutilation of life at play in the Christian ‘ascetic ideal’ (Nietzsche 2003, 93).

<sup>190</sup> In Badiou’s reading, Paul reserves the operation of salvation exclusively to the event of resurrection, separating it completely from Christ’s death on

resurrection by making manifest that the infinite dimension of immortal truth is also accessible to mortal human beings. Thus, not only is there no dialectical relationship between death and resurrection, there is no relationship at all: “[...] there is an absolute disjunction between Christ’s death and his resurrection” (SP 70). Or, in Badiou’s terminology: there is no relation at all between the ‘evental site’ (Christ’s death) and the event; the event of resurrection is a ‘pure’ event, an absolute rupture, entirely new. Yet is this not very close to the position that Badiou (TS 10-12, 16-17; BE 210-211), in his outline in *Theory of the Subject* of the dialectical relapses, describes as a ‘leftist relapse’, and in *Being and Event* criticizes under the heading of ‘speculative leftism’ (or in theological terms ‘Manichaeism’); that is, the position of ‘absolute of novelty’, which denies the possibility of the old (the site/death) inherent in the new (event/resurrection)? And is not the assertion of such a radical rupture, absolute break, one of the main features that Badiou ascribes to antiphilosophy, namely the radically groundbreaking act or event?

### *The Lure of Anti-dialectics*

The conception of death outlined above and the resulting assertion of a radically anti-dialectical position will lead Badiou (59; 73-74; 102) to purify Paul’s position completely from any association with the doctrine of incarnation and Trinitarian theology.<sup>191</sup> Of course this raises the question of how Badiou explains the relationship between the Father and the Son if he doesn’t want to make use of either the doctrine of incarnation or the doctrine of trinity. In contrast to the (philosophical) relationship between the Master and the Disciple, Badiou (SP 59) describes the Son as “one whose life is beginning.” And he continues: “The possibility of such a beginning requires that God the Father [...] has assumed the form of the Son.” Spontaneously one thinks here of incarnation, but according to Badiou this is

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the cross. In Badiou’s (SP 68) words: “For Paul death cannot be the operation of salvation.” Such a reading is of course not only in conflict with a Hegelian dialectical reading, but with a whole tradition going back to at least Martin Luther, of reading Paul as an exemplary model of ‘theologia crucis’. For a critique of ‘Badiou’s wilful misreading of the role of the death of Christ in Paul’s theology’ see L.L Welborn (2009).

<sup>191</sup> Let me just note in passing that while Badiou (SP 59) claims that: “Paul has no interest at all in such Trinitarian questions”, Paul does actually hint at the Trinitarian character of God in 2 Corinthians 13:13.



not at all the case. So how does Badiou explain that ‘God the Father assumes the form of the Son’? He does so by referring to what Badiou himself admits to be an ‘enigmatic term’ – the ‘sending’ of the Son. As Badiou (SP 59) puts it: “Later, theology will indulge in all sorts of contortion in order to establish the substantial identity of the Father and the Son. Paul has no interest at all in such Trinitarian questions. The antiphilosophical metaphor of the ‘sending of the son’ is enough for him, for he requires only the event and refuses all philosophical reinscriptions of this pure occurrence by means of the philosophical vocabulary of substance and identity.” The opposition outlined here by Badiou between the ‘Trinitarian establishment of the substantial identity of the Father and the Son’ and the ‘sending of the son’ suggests that Badiou understands the ‘sending of the son’ as the abolition of the ‘substantial identity of the Father and the Son’, or in short, the leave-taking with the metaphysical notion of a transcendent God/Father. An interpretation that Badiou (SP 73-74) confirms when he later in *Saint Paul* underlines that:

It is essential to remember that for Paul, Christ is not identical with God, that no Trinitarian or substantialist theology upholds his preaching. Wholly faithful to the pure event, Paul restricts himself to the metaphor of ‘the sending of the son’. As a result, for Paul, it is not the infinite that died on the cross. Certainly, the construction of the evental site requires that the son who was sent to us, terminating the abyss of transcendence, be immanent to the path of the flesh, of death, to all the dimensions of the human subject. In no way does this entail that Christ is the incarnation of God, or that he must be thought of as the becoming-finite of the infinite.

However, my assertion is that Badiou’s antidialectical rejection of the doctrines of incarnation and trinity, replacing them with the ‘enigmatic term’ of ‘sending the son’, does not, as he claims, lead to the ‘terminating of the abyss of transcendence’, quite the contrary. By rejecting the doctrines of incarnation and the trinity (over the simple ‘sending the son’) Badiou precludes himself from giving a more precise answer as to why and how the ‘sending of the son’ is equivalent to having done with the transcendent Father. Rather, it seems to beg the question of what happens to the Father after the sending of the son, and thus paradoxically uphold the very idea of a transcendent God. Does not the ‘sending’ of someone also necessarily imply a sender? To put it plainly: Dismissing the Trinitarian dialectics of incarnation

and claiming an absolute separation, or the non-identity of the Father and the Son through the ‘sending’ of the latter, in no way automatically makes the former disappear, nor does it terminate his transcendence. Quite the opposite, it appears to merely strengthen the transcendence of the Father as being absolutely disjoined from, or wholly ‘Other’ than the Son. In Badiou’s terminology one could say: Will not the assertion of an absolute disjunction, the rejection of any dialectical relation, between the evental site and the event in the end lead to an (idealist) conceptualization of the latter’s miraculous ‘*creatio ex nihilo*’? Badiou, as we know, is not unaware that such an idealist danger is lurking in his conception of the event. According to Badiou (TW 100-101), this is precisely what the notion of evental site is designed to remedy. By designating it as a ‘fragment of being’, Badiou (TW 101) seems to suggest that the ‘evental site’ is capable of anchoring the event in the situation, but with compromising its ‘supplementary’ and exceptional character. But, as we have already seen, in *Saint Paul*, the evental site (death) in no way forms a ‘bridge’ between the event and the situation in which it takes place; quite the contrary, Badiou’s (SP 70) assertion is that there exists an ‘absolute disjunction between Christ’s death (the evental site) and the event of his resurrection’. Here Badiou seems to contradict his own (self?)critical reading of Pascal earlier in the same book (SP 50-53), in which he, as I argued in chapter one, via Paul distances himself from a conception of the event as a miracle without any relation to the situation in which it occurs. Apparently Badiou has trouble keeping the necessary distance to what seems to be an inherent ‘antiphilosophical’, or in Žižek’s terms ‘idealist’, tendency in his own philosophy.<sup>192</sup>

### *Incarnation and Representation*

However, it is not only Badiou’s emphasis on the ‘sending the son’, but also his understanding of the incarnation and more generally the doctrine of trinity, that is problematic. What is

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<sup>192</sup> In his article *Radical Philosophy*, Bosteels (2008, 181-187) suggests that Badiou has a tendency, especially in his critical engagement with antiphilosophical figures like Paul and Nietzsche (whom he also admires), to embrace certain aspects of the very anti-philosophy that he is trying to combat. Bosteels’ suggestion could be understood as a parallel to Žižek’s (much more confrontational) allegations of idealism; though normally Bosteels (2004, 151; 2005b; 614-615) is a strong defender of Badiou against allegations of idealist and anti-dialectical tendencies.

significant about Badiou's rejection of the incarnation (and the doctrine of the trinity) in *Saint Paul* is that it is obviously based on animosity towards its declaration of 'the substantial identity of Father and Son'. This is an issue which takes us to the very heart of the doctrine of incarnation, if not the very heart of Christian theology as such.<sup>193</sup> So let's take a closer look at Badiou's perception of the incarnation and the issue of the substantial identity of Father and Son. Badiou's assertion of the 'substantial identity between Father and Son' in *Saint Paul* suggests a shift in his perspective in relation to *Theory of the Subject*. In the latter, Badiou does not once refer to 'substantial identity between Father and Son', however, he does use the expression 'The Son is consubstantial with the Father' (alluding to the Nicene Creed). Badiou (TS 15-16) also qualifies 'consubstantiality' further, namely as an inherent scission in God: Although God the Father and God the Son are 'of the same being (substance)' there is a difference between them, but a difference with 'no qualitative support', that is, a non-substantial difference (the incarnation is the formula of this non-substantial scission). One could argue that conceptualizing this is precisely the point of the technical term 'homoousion' (ὁμοούσιον), created by the Nicene Fathers.<sup>194</sup> In *Saint Paul*, by contrast, Badiou in no way qualifies his reference to the 'substantial identity between Father and Son' in a similar way.

Badiou does not go into any extensive discussions or give any direct definition of incarnation in *Saint Paul*, but he does nevertheless provide an indirect definition. At the very end of

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<sup>193</sup> As Jean-Luc Nancy (2008, 151) puts it: "[...] we are well aware that the heart of Christian theology is constituted by Christology, that the heart of Christology is the doctrine of incarnation and that the heart of the doctrine of incarnation is the doctrine of *homoousia* [...]."

<sup>194</sup> In his detailed exposition of the theological discussions surrounding the term 'homoousia' (ὁμοούσια) Christopher Stead (1997, 160-172.) implies that in creating this technical term, the Nicene Fathers did in fact (unintentionally) contribute to destabilizing and displacing the Aristotelian conception of being (οὐσία) as self-identical. Thus the prefix 'homo' challenges the unity of the divine substance, while at the same time being in opposition to the Arians emphasizing the unity of the hypostases (ὑπόστασις) or persons of the trinity, especially the consubstantiality between Father and Son. In this light, the doctrine of 'homoousia' could be read, not as a confirmation of the pure substantial sameness of identity, but as an alternative conceptualization of identity, which, qua its inherent scission, indeed undermines any substantialist notion of identity.

chapter seven in the paragraph on the ‘sending of the son’, which I have already quoted in the above, Badiou underlines that although Christ must be fully immanent to all dimensions of human life, including death, this does not in any way entail that “[...] Christ is the incarnation of God, or that he must be thought of as the becoming-finite of the infinite.” This exact description of the incarnation as the ‘becoming-finite of the infinite’ is echoed in Badiou’s (HI 3, 11; TC 116, 153-54) critical discussions in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* and *The Century* of what he terms the ‘romantic schema’ in modern art, which he regards as part of the broader tendency of ‘romanticism’ mentioned in the previous chapter. To put it briefly, Badiou criticizes the romantic schema of privileging art as the singular place of truth, of its celebration of human finitude, and most importantly in the present context, of entailing a transposition of the schema of incarnation, and the specific conception of infinity that it involves, into the domain of art. Thus in *The Century*, Badiou (TC 153-154) describes one of the main features of the romantic conception of art in the following way:

Art is the descent of the infinity of the Ideal into the finitude of the work. The artist, elevated by genius, is the sacrificial medium of this descent. This is a transposition of the Christian schema of the incarnation: the genius lends Spirit the forms it has mastered so that the people may recognize its own spiritual infinitude in the finitude of the work. Since in the end it’s the work that bears witness to the incarnation of the infinite, romanticism cannot avoid making the work sacred.

From this quote it is quite clear that Badiou perceives of incarnation in terms of representation: We *recognize* the infinite ideal in the finite work, the finite work *bears witness* to the infinite ideal, or in other words, the heavenly infinite Father is represented on earth in the finite body of the Son.<sup>195</sup> The

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<sup>195</sup> The best illustration of the conception of infinity criticized by Badiou in his polemic against romanticism is, as Hallward (2003, 67) suggests, perhaps the Kantian sublime. For Kant, the sublime designates an experience of something which cannot be represented, but which is alone indicated through this impossibility of its representation. However, in the end the Kantian sublime remains within the constraints of a representational logic, because, as Žižek (SOI 205) put it in his sketch of Hegel’s critique of Kant, “Precisely when we determine the [sublime] Thing as a transcendent surplus beyond what can be represented, we determine it on the basis of the field of representation [...]”

preconditions of this logic of representation (in fact any logic of representation), ascribed by Badiou to the incarnation, is precisely God's substantial identity with himself.<sup>196</sup> For the Son to be a representation of the Father, the latter must be self-identical, in the sense of being stable, consistent, without differing.<sup>197</sup> Interestingly, the delineation of incarnation given in *Saint Paul* and in the discussion of romantic art, thus hints that Badiou has abandoned his earlier suggestion in *Theory of the Subject* that in the Christian conception of God there is an inherent scission in God's self-identity, since such an inherent scission would ruin the logic of representation. In short: if there is an intrinsic, non-substantial difference or gap between God (the Father) and God (the Son), then God (the Son) cannot represent God (the Father); rather, God (the Son) has to *be* God (the Father).<sup>198</sup> But actually Badiou already annuls this suggestion of an inherent scission in God in *Theory of the Subject*. It is evident that Badiou in his reading of Hegel's theologically modelled dialectic in *Theory of the Subject* ultimately also here understands the incarnation in terms of a logic of representation. According to Badiou, in Hegel's dialectic, after his death the resurrected God (the Son) rejoins, or is reconciled with, himself (the Father), seated in heaven from eternity to eternity, which thus in the end portrays the incarnated

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<sup>196</sup> Let me just note in passing that in part of the theological tradition, the identity between the Father and the Son is actually not perceived, as implied by Badiou's perception of the incarnation, in substantialist terms but, rather, in *relational* terms (see Jüngel 2006, 28).

<sup>197</sup> In chapter three of *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze (2004, 164-208) convincingly illustrates how what he calls 'the dogmatic image of thought', which is characterised first of all by representation, is founded on the idea of a stable and serene, a substantially identical, world. As Deleuze (2004, xvii) notes on the very first page of this book: "The primacy of identity, however conceived, defines the world of representation." Deleuze (*ibid.*) explicitly links this kind of thinking to Hegel. As we shall see, Žižek presents a quite different reading of Hegel on precisely this point, and thus it is not surprising that this issue constitutes one of the key concerns in Žižek's (OWB 45-55) book on Deleuze.

<sup>198</sup> In Žižek's (FTKN 35-37) reading, Hegel presents a similar conception of self-identity when the latter unmasks that the core of the tautological formula of the Judeo-Christian God, 'God is God' (Exodus 3,14), is pure contradictions as a non-substantial difference or self-relating negativity. Actually Žižek (FTKH 36) is staggeringly close to the Badiou of *Theory of the Subject* in his formulation of this point: "Therein consists, in short, the Hegelian conception of identity: identity of an entity with itself equals the coincidence of this entity with the empty place of its 'inscription'."

God (the Son) as an earthly mediator representing the heavenly God (the Father). Or, as Badiou (TS 16) puts it: “Seated to His own right side, God (the Son) is no more than the immutable intercessor for the tribunal of God (the Father).”

If we should try to place Badiou’s reading of Hegel’s dialectic, and thus also its underlying theological model, in relation to the struggle between materialism and idealism, there is little doubt that Badiou (TS 117-121) would place Hegel as well as the Christian doctrines of incarnation and trinity on the side of idealism. But at the same time, Badiou himself comes precariously close to the idealist side of this dividing line in his anti-dialectical quest to purge Paul of every trace of incarnation and trinity by asserting the absolute separation of the death of Christ and his resurrection. However, the pressing question is of course whether Badiou’s indirect portrayal of Trinitarian theology as circular and the incarnation as counterpart to representational logic is really the only possible, or in fact even a fair, reading. As implied in the above, Žižek’s Hegelian reading of the Christian tradition might provide another, indeed materialist, conception of the Trinitarian dialectic. Furthermore, in the course of their interpretation of Hegel’s reflections on comedy, both Žižek (2006) and Alenka Zupančič (2008b) have suggested a rather different understanding of the incarnation; in Hegel Christ is constituted, not as a mere mediator or a sublime expression of infinity, as Badiou claims, but precisely as a break with representational thinking as such.

### **The ‘Minimal Difference’ of Incarnation**

The doctrine of incarnation concerns the two natures of Christ. Or to put it in other words, it concerns Christ’s relationship to the divine nature, to God-the-father from whom he is born, and Christ’s relationship to the human nature in which he is incarnated. In his considerations on the figure of Christ, Žižek (e.g. OWB 67; 103) sometimes describes these two relationships – Christ’s relationship to God-the-father and his relationship to other men – in the exact same way, namely in terms of what he calls the ‘minimal difference’. In *The Parallax View*, Žižek (PV 105) moreover identifies this minimal difference as the essential issue of true comedy, which is why, as he notes, that Kierkegaard is right when he “[...] insisted that there is a comical side to Christianity: is there anything more comical than incarnation, this ridiculous overlapping of the Highest and the

Lowest, the coincidence of God, the creator of the universe, and a miserable man?” However, Kierkegaard is not the first philosopher to notice a connection between comedy and incarnation, as Alenka Zupančič (2008b, 39) points out in her book on comedy, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kierkegaard’s major official opponent, Hegel, “[...] works out and establishes a direct passage from comedy to the very core of Christianity (as revealed religion), which he discusses in the subsequent section, focusing particularly on the moment of incarnation.” As this indicates, the example of comedy might constitute a useful way to illustrate Žižek’s understanding of incarnation as ‘minimal difference’. The issue of comedy is moreover a very appropriate example in the present context, because it permits us, as we shall see, to return to the matter of the relationship between incarnation and the representation, which was the core in the discussion of Badiou’s interpretation of the doctrine of incarnation. Even more importantly, by means of Žižek’s scattered comments on comedy, supplemented by Zupančič’s more detailed discussion of this subject, it is possible to identify and clarify a strong link between incarnation and materialism. But let us begin by trying to nail down more precisely what Žižek means by ‘minimal difference’.

In fact, Žižek (e.g. PV 36) uses ‘minimal difference’ to designate one of the most fundamental and recurrent thought-figures in his philosophy, namely the idea of the same characterised by an inherent split, a non-coincidence with itself. Presumably Žižek has obtained the notion from Badiou, who in his book *The Century* uses ‘minimal difference’ as a characterization of Malevich’s famous painting *White on White*. This painting, which we have touched upon above, shows a white square against a white background. It alludes, as Badiou (TC 55) puts it, to “[...] a minimal difference, the abstract difference of ground and form, and above all, the null difference between white and white, the difference of the Same – what we could call vanishing difference.”<sup>199</sup> Here the gesture of repetition

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<sup>199</sup> Thus, Žižek (e.g. FTKN lxxxviii; OWB 103) often refers to this passage on Malevich in *The Century*. However, he also sometimes characterizes the minimal difference as a ‘Deleuzian’ term referring to Deleuze’s conceptualization of ‘pure difference’ developed in particularly *Difference and Repetition*, but also in *Logic of Sense* and *The Time-Image*, both of which Žižek (OWB 64; PV 122) explicitly refers to on this matter (see also *Organs without Bodies* in which there is a whole section entitled ‘minimal difference’ [OWB 60-74]).

of the same, the white affirmation of white background, creates a gap or a 'minimal difference' between white and white (in the same). The difference in question in 'white on white' is thus not grounded in any positive substantial properties. Another, philosophical, illustration of what is meant by this minimal difference, which I have already talked about in the previous section on Badiou, could be the Hegelian conception of the 'constitutive scission' of identity, elaborated in the beginning of the *Science of Logic*. As I emphasized in my exposition of *Theory of the Subject*, this scission was generated precisely through the mere repetition of the same, of 'something' (A) and 'something in another place' (Ap). Or to rephrase it in Žižek's (PV 38) wording: "The difference between S1 and S2 is [...] not that of two signifiers, but that of the signifier and its *reduplicatio*, that is to say, the minimal difference between a signifier and the place of its inscription, between one and zero." Žižek (FTKN 7-60) deals in detail with this issue in Hegel in the first chapter of one of his earliest books. Very appropriate for the present context, he (FTKN 35) takes his starting point in a passage from the *Science of Logic* in which Hegel (1989, 415) offers an analysis of the tautology 'God is God'.<sup>200</sup> In fact, Zupančič employs the very same example from Hegel to illustrate the notion of the minimal difference in a discussion of comedy and love in her book *The Shortest Shadow*. Here she (Zupančič 2003, 168) offers the following very lucid reading of Hegel's argument:

[...] let us determine more precisely what this 'minimal difference' is. [...] to take a more sophisticated example from the Hegelian theory of tautology: if I say 'a is a' the two 'a's are not exactly the same. The very fact that one appears in the place of the subject and

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<sup>200</sup> What Hegel (1989, 415) does in this passage is, as Žižek (FTKN 48) explains, nothing less than subvert the 'principle of identity' (e.g. A=A) by unmasking how the tautological repetition of the same in 'God is God' produces a 'void' or 'pure contradiction' (a minimal difference) as constitutive of God's identity. Apropos my brief 'speculation' on the doctrine of 'homoousia' in the above section; could this doctrine not be read in a similar 'tautological' way? Žižek does in fact explicitly relate this Hegelian 'subversive' conception of identity (condensed in the famous formula 'substance is subject') with the Judeo-Christian notion of God, although not via the doctrine of 'homoousia', but with reference to Exodus 3:14, when he (FTKN 48) claims that "[...] only the Judaic-Christian God, the one of the tautology 'I am what I am', can be said to be subject."



the other in the place of the predicate introduces a minimal difference between them.

As I have already implied, both Žižek (PV 105; cf. OB 90) and Zupančič (2003, 167; 2008b, 36) argue that there is something comical about this minimal difference, and that this comical aspect is also at stake in incarnation, in the figure of Christ. More precisely, the comical aspect has to do with the fact that the minimal difference, as Hegel pointed out, subverts the consistency of identity (see FTKN 48). One of the examples that Žižek employs to illustrate this point is Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*. In this movie, Chaplin appears in the double form of the dictator Hynkel, and the Jewish barber, hence producing a difference, not between the Thing in itself and its appearance but, rather, an almost imperceptible difference between these two appearances. Žižek's (OB 90) point is, as he states in *On Belief*, that as "[...] Chaplin demonstrate[s], there is always something comic in this unfathomable difference that undermines the established identity ([...] Hynkel IS the Jewish barber)." Another comical example that both Žižek (PV 109) and Zupančič (2003, 168) use to make the same point is the following punch line from a Marx Brothers movie: 'Look at this guy, he looks like an idiot, he acts like an idiot, but this should not deceive you—he is an idiot!' As Žižek (PV 109) notes this joke is properly comical, because "[...] instead of a hidden terrifying secret, we encounter the same thing behind the veil as in front of it, this very lack of difference between the two elements confronts us with the "pure" difference that separates an element from itself." And, as we shall see in a moment, it is indeed something along the very same lines that is revealed through the Christian 'joke' of incarnation.

This (comical) subversion of the established identity through the confrontation with its own minimal difference is, according to Žižek, also what makes the notion of minimal difference properly materialistic. As he (PV 168) points out in *The Parallax View*: "[...] the notions of parallax gap and of 'minimal difference' obey the logic of the non-All." The basic assertion of the Lacanian logic of non-All logic is, as outlined in the above, the incompleteness of reality, which, as we know, is for Žižek (MC 240) precisely 'the basic axiom of today's materialism'. And what true materialist comedy does, that is, the kind of comedy in which the comic motor is the minimal difference, is

precisely to unmask and embody the incompleteness of reality itself. Or as Zupančič (2008b, 47) formulates it:

The reason for which comedy is, indeed, profoundly materialistic is not simply that it reminds us of, and insists upon, the mud, the dirt, dense and coarse reality as our ultimate horizon (which we need to accept), and as a condition of our lives. Comedy is materialistic because it gives voice and body to the impasses and contradictions of this materiality itself. *This* is the true incarnation involved in comedy.

Now that we have a basic idea of the notion of minimal difference, which is at the very heart of both comedy and incarnation, let us turn to Žižek's and Zupančič's analyses of comedy, focusing in particular on their (Hegelian) considerations on the abolishment of representation and how this relates to the issue of incarnation, including the materialistic aspect of the latter implied by Zupančič in the above quote.

In her book on comedy *The Odd One Inn* Zupančič begins her investigation of Hegel's thoughts on comedy with a short instructive outline of the context of the section on comedy in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This outline elucidates how the close connection that Hegel establishes between comedy and Christianity (particularly incarnation) as revealed religion is emphasized through the very composition of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, since the section on 'the revealed religion' follows immediately after Hegel's exposition of the triad of epic, tragedy and lastly comedy in the last part of the preceding section entitled 'Religion in the form of art'. As Zupančič (2008b, 23) notes, the key issue for Hegel in this last part (of the latter section), termed 'the spiritual work of art', is the theme of representation. According to Zupančič (2008b, 23), Hegel describes the three forms of spiritual art (the epic, the tragedy and the comedy) as three different ways of mediating a split between the individual and the universal.<sup>201</sup> In summery, Zupančič (2008b, 27-28) depicts these three different relationships of mediation in the following manner: "[...] in the epic, the subject *narrates* the universal, the essential, the absolute; in tragedy, the subject *enacts or stages* the universal,

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<sup>201</sup> Or, rather, as Zupančič (2008b, 23) herself points out, Hegel names this split, which constitutes the starting point of the part on 'the spiritual works of art', in several different ways. However, she mainly uses the pair individual/universal.

the essential, the absolute; in comedy, the subject *is* (or becomes) the universal, the essential, the absolute. Which is also to say that the universal, the essential, the absolute, becomes the subject.”<sup>202</sup> The crucial point here is that this succession, sketched by Hegel, from the epic through tragedy to comedy constitutes, as noted by Zupančič (2008b, 23), a gradual abolishment of representation; that is, while both the narrative language of the epic and the actor staging the tragedy *represents* the universal, the subject of comedy *is* the universal. This is crucial, because it is precisely this feature that indicates a parallel between comedy and incarnation. As, Žižek (PV 105) puts it in *The Parallax View*, commenting on Hegel:

[...] the passage from tragedy to comedy concerns overcoming the limits of representation: while, in a tragedy, the individual actor represents the universal character he plays, in a comedy, he immediately *is* this character. The gap of representation is thus closed, exactly as in the case of Christ who, in contrast to previous pagan divinities, does not ‘represent’ some universal power or principle [...]: as this miserable human, Christ directly is God.

In the succeeding passage, Žižek (PV 106) elaborates how both in the case of comedy and incarnation this ‘gap’ that he refers to, which constitutes the pre-condition of the logic of representation, is closed in a ‘properly Hegelian’ or dialectical way, that is to say, not by simply opposing it but, rather, by radicalizing it. Thus, in comedy, the gap or difference, which in tragedy separates the actor from his stage character, is transposed into the person himself as an inherent minimal difference. The

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<sup>202</sup> My italics. In tragedy we start with the concrete subject and we ascend to abstract universality, in comedy, on the other hand, we have the opposite movement: we start with abstract universality and descend to concrete subjective universality. Or, as Zupančič (2008b, 37) puts it: “In tragedy the acting subject, via the various ordeals that befall her, has to let [...] some universal idea, principle, or destiny shine through her. In comedy, in contrast, some universality (‘tramp’, ‘worker’, ‘misanthrope’ ...) has to let a subject in all his concreteness shine through it [...]” According to Zupančič (2008b, 38) this ‘movement of the universal from the abstract to the concrete’ is precisely Hegel’s definition of comedy. In his comments on comedy in Hegel, Žižek (PV 107) also touches upon this ‘movement of the universal’; explicitly linking it to the figure of Christ, he describes it in terms clearly echoing the notion of minimal difference: “The universals undermined by Christ are ‘abstract’ substantial universals (presented in the guise of the Jewish law), while ‘concrete’ universality is the very negativity of undermining abstract universals.”

precise same movement is at stake in the incarnation: in the figure of Christ the gap or difference between God and man is transposed into God himself (PV 106; cf. PV 6). The climax of this movement is, as Žižek (PV 106) notes, Christ's cry on the cross: Father, why have you forsaken me?<sup>203</sup>

Before I elaborate any further on Žižek's thoughts on incarnation, I want to return for a short moment to Badiou's reading in *Theory of the Subject* of Hegel's dialectic. As I have already argued in the above, Badiou's reading of the Hegelian dialectic and the theological model grounding implies a logic of representation, because according to Badiou (TS 16) in Hegel's dialectic the resurrection cancels out the incarnation and death of God by 'restoring him to his own right side' and thus leaving his transcendence intact, which means that in the end Christ was nothing but the heavenly God's earthly representative. This is also why Hegel's (theologically modelled) dialectic, according to Badiou, in the end remains idealist rather than truly materialistic. It should be quite evident from their emphasis on Hegel's critical attitude toward the logic of representation that neither Žižek nor Zupančič would agree with the interpretation presented by Badiou. Indeed, Zupančič (2008b, 39-40) explicitly suggests a completely opposing interpretation of Hegel's reading of the

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<sup>203</sup> Another helpful way of illustrating this passage is Hegel's critique of the Kantian conception of the sublime, which Žižek examines in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. As, Žižek (SOI 203) explains, to Kant "The Sublime is [...] the paradox of an object which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way, of the dimension of what is unrepresentable." Or, put differently, in Kant's conception of the sublime "[...] the place of the Thing is indicated through the very failure of its representation" (SOI 204). After this characterization, Žižek's (SOI 205) outlines the essence of Hegel's critique of the Kantian sublime in the following way: "Hegel's reproach of Kant (and at the same time of Jewish religion) is [...] that it is Kant himself who still remains a prisoner of the field of representation. Precisely when we determine the Thing as a transcendent surplus beyond what can be represented, we determine it on the basis of the field of representation [...]." The most interesting thing about this is that Hegel, as implied by Žižek in the last quote, explicitly draws a parallel between the movement beyond the logic of representation, which in the end still characterises Kant's sublime, and the passage in the field of religion from Judaism to Christianity. This means, as Žižek (PD 80) notes in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, that: "Christ is not 'sublime' in the sense of an 'object elevated to the dignity of a Thing', he is not a stand-in for the impossible Thing-God; he is rather [...] nothing but the rupture/gap which makes Christ not fully human." See also *On Belief* (OB 89).

dialectical dimension of Christianity, in which she concludes that the key point of this Hegelian reading is rather that:

[...] revelation and incarnation also imply that with Christ's death on the Cross (that is the death of the self or subject that incarnates the Essence) it is the transcendent God himself who dies, the Beyond as such. The death of Christ, which Hegel reads as an intrinsic moment of the Resurrection, does not mean that after it the Essence, untouched in itself, returns to the Beyond and reestablishes the latter. *For this would imply that we have remained stuck with the representative logic of Greek gods as universal powers that are not limited by their own individual appearance [...].*<sup>204</sup>

From Žižek's Hegelian musings on the doctrine of incarnation, as he unfolds them for instance in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, it is quite clear that he is in full agreement with Zupančič's reading, although he does not, as she does, explicitly link these considerations with Hegel's critique of representation. According to Žižek, the essential point of incarnation is precisely that since Christ is not only God's representative, but *is* God, then once God is incarnated, once he becomes man, there is no way back, there is no longer any God that dwells in a transcendent Beyond with whom Christ could be reconciled after he died on the cross and to whom we can pray or sacrifice. And the same goes for Christ: since he is a man, once he is dead, what we are left with is the spirit of a believing community, which exists only insofar that the subjects that constitute it act as if it exists. In a crucial passage in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek (MC 32-33) formulates it in the following way:

The lesson of Christian Incarnation (God becomes man) is that to speak of divine Persons outside Incarnation is meaningless, at best a remainder of pagan polytheism. Of course, the Bible says 'God sent and sacrificed his only Son'—but the way to read this is: the Son was not present in God prior to Incarnation, sitting up there at his side. Incarnation is the birth of Christ, and after his death, there is neither Father nor Son but 'only' the Holy Spirit, the spiritual substance of the religious community.

As he clearly indicates in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek (MC 254) is quite well aware of the Trinitarian consequences implied in this quotation, namely the complete identification of the 'economic' and the 'immanent' trinity: "[...] what was going on

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<sup>204</sup> My italics.

in the earthly reality of Palestine two thousand years ago was *a process in the very heart of God himself*; there was (and is) no higher reality backing it up.” So far Žižek’s thoughts on the incarnation have mainly been explained in terms of its consequences; but what, more precisely, does this process ‘in the very heart of God himself’ involve? If, as Jean-Luc Nancy (2008, 151) says, the heart of Christology is the doctrine of incarnation and Christology is the very heart of theology, then what does Žižek’s considerations on incarnation tell us about his conception of God?

The short answer is that it is Žižek’s assertion that in the figure of Christ we have a notion of God as a ‘gap’, namely God as the inherent minimal difference between God and God, well illustrated, as Žižek (FTKN 48) himself suggests, in the famous formula from Exodus 3:14: ‘I am what I am.’ According to Žižek (PD 24), the gap, as we find it in most other religions, between man and God is in Christianity transposed into God himself, so that God no longer is the God of Beyond separated by a gap, but *is* this gap as such. This is indeed a ‘materialist’ reading of the incarnation, because insofar as the incarnation closes, or rather, transposes the external gap between man and God, between here and beyond, into God himself, it eliminates the very basis, not only of representation, but of idealism. As Žižek (PV 106) points out, this transposition, which takes its starting point in incarnation, is fully completed in Christ’s cry on the cross ‘father, why have you forsaken me?’, the point at which God loses his faith in and becomes alienated from himself (MC 48, 59). This is, as Žižek (MC 57) emphasizes in his Hegelian musings in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, the point at which the alienation or ‘kenosis’ of man and God overlaps.<sup>205</sup> The Christian God, or Christ given he is the only possible identification of God (MC 31), is thus identical to man, because, according to Žižek (PV 123), what characterizes man, the human animal, is not his difference from other animals, but precisely an inherent (minimal) difference or gap in man himself between a

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<sup>205</sup> On this matter of ‘double kenosis’, but also more generally, Žižek’s reading is quite close to Catherine Malabou’s (2005, 82; 91-93; 111-113) more systematic exposition of Hegel’s theological reflections in her outstanding book *The Future of Hegel*, to which Žižek (MC 104; 106) refers on several occasions. As Malabou (2005, 82) notes in his translation of the Letter to the Philippians, Luther translates κένωσις as Entäußerung (‘the separation of the self through an externalization’), which is the term Hegel uses to describe ‘alienation’ (together with Entfremdung).

human and an inhuman dimension. Thus the gap that separates God from God and man from man is what unites God and man (PV 106). This also means that what separates Christ from other men is nothing but the same inherent minimal difference that separates man (including Christ) from himself. Confronting this inherent gap in man himself, this self-alienation in which God and man concur, is exactly what characterizes the ‘Christian experience’ that anyone who wants to become a true dialectical materialist must go through according to Žižek (PD 6).

Let me conclude this chapter by briefly summarizing the two highly important theological consequences of Žižek’s (radical) Hegelian reading of the incarnation. The first consequence is that with the incarnation, with the birth of Christ, God disappears from the transcendent world, which at the same time disappears with him. This is the materialist insight exposed by Christ’s cry on the cross: The non-existence of the big Other. The other consequence is, as Žižek (OB 90) emphasizes in *On Belief*, that this first consequence, however, does *not* simply mean the abolishment of transcendence; rather, transcendence is made accessible in the concrete as the immanent transcendence of the minimal difference. It is the question of how more precisely we should understand such an immanent transcendence that I will address in the next chapter, outlining Žižek’s and Badiou’s conceptions of subjectivity.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Let me just note in passing that there is also another sense in which the consequence of Žižek’s dialectical materialism is not strictly speaking the abolishment of transcendence. Although Žižek, following Hegel’s critique of the Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’, argues that the transcendent, noumenal domain is an illusion generated out of the immanent plane of phenomena, he does not conclude that transcendent illusions are therefore not real or that they will necessarily disappear; on the contrary, it seems to be his point that due to the constitution of the immanent plane of phenomena, due its incomplete nature, it will inevitably give rise to transcendent illusions. In *Organs without Bodies*, Žižek (OWB 60-61) describes this Hegelian stance in the following way: “For Hegel, the gap between phenomena and their transcendent Ground is a secondary effect of the *absolutely immanent* gap of/in the phenomena themselves. ‘Transcendence’ is the illusory reflection of the fact that the immanence of phenomena is ruptured, broken, inconsistent. To put it in somewhat simplified terms, it is not that phenomena are broken, that we have multiple partial perspectives, because the transcendent Thing eludes our grasp; on the contrary, the specter of this Thing is the ‘reified’ effect of the inconsistency of phenomena. [...] immanence generates the spectre of transcendence because it is already inconsistent in itself.”

## Chapter 4

### The Return of Immortality – Theories of the Subject in Badiou and Žižek

*The immortality of the soul  
is a matter which is of so  
great consequence to us  
and which touches us so  
profoundly that we must  
have lost all feeling to be  
indifferent as to knowing  
what it is.*

Blaise Pascal

#### Introduction

Coming from someone who sees himself as a full-blown materialist and militant atheist it undoubtedly has a strange ring to it when Badiou (LW 1) poses the following question on the very first page of his latest major work, *Logics of Worlds*: “Who today would speak of the separability of our immortal soul, other than to conform to a certain rhetoric?” The question is of course rhetorical, signalling that this is in fact precisely what Badiou is going to speak about. Several times throughout the book Badiou (LW 40, 49, 71, 86, 87, 507, 511, 513) thus repeats the peculiar, or in our modern ears perhaps even slightly embarrassing, assertion that man is not only a mortal being, but also a being who is capable of immortality. The fact that Badiou (E 12, 14, 16, 27, 36, 43, 51, 75, 78) also advances this assertion numerous times in his small book on ethics, published in 1993, suggests that he is not just ‘conforming to a certain rhetoric’. However, this claim of immortality, which is related not merely to Badiou’s conception of ethics but also to his critique of the metaphysics of finitude, has to be understood against the backdrop of the theories of the subject and truth that he presents in *Being and Event* and develops further in *Logics of Worlds*. Yet, Badiou is not the only philosopher (or even the only materialist philosopher) around claiming to have something to say about this presumably outdated and suspiciously religious-sounding issue of immortality. On several occasions throughout the more recent parts of his oeuvre, Žižek (PF 113; TTS 52, 66,



294; OWB 169; PV; 62, 110, 115, 118 182; IDLC 54, 148, 395) too employs this term, above all in his elaborations of subjectivity. So what should we make of this rather strange return to the theme of immortality, a fundamental theological theme if there ever was one, in the works of two blatant atheist philosophers? And what exactly does ‘immortality’ refer to according to Badiou and Žižek, if not to a ‘simple’ religious and idealist idea of eternal life in another world? This is one of the issues I will try to shed some light on in this chapter.

In both Badiou’s and Žižek’s work, the theme of immortality is, as I have faintly indicated, closely intertwined with a number of other issues. This means that a proper account of the theme of immortality involves an exposition of (at least) some of these issues. Besides, several of these issues, of which the notion of the subject is the most important, are themselves of patent theological interest. Thus, let me point out a few overlapping themes, which both Badiou and Žižek (although in somewhat different ways) relate to their use of the terms ‘immortal’ and ‘immortality’, and which I will touch upon throughout this chapter.

To begin with, both Badiou (LW 511) and Žižek (PV 117-118) associate immortality with something inhuman in man, something in which he exceeds his own nature, an excess which for both of them has to do with the incomplete nature of being. Moreover, this inhuman, excessive dimension, which paradoxically is precisely what makes man human, what sets him apart from other animals, is for both of them closely connected to the issue of freedom. To put it crudely, for Badiou and Žižek it holds that if man can become immortal it is basically due to his inhuman capacity for freedom. Yet they both see freedom as also involving, indeed even relying on, an element of contingency, or in theological terms a moment of grace. Furthermore, this capacity for freedom, which according to both Badiou (LW 34) and Žižek (PV 202) consists – in its most basic form – in a rupture with our own immediate interest, a break away from the prevailing order of things, is also the fulcrum of any genuine conception of ethics. This agreement is without doubt (partly) due to a common inspiration from Jacques Lacan, even though he is also at the heart of Badiou’s and Žižek’s most serious disagreement concerning their conceptions of the subject. This brings us to the issue to which both Badiou (E 12, 132) and Žižek (TTS 66) primarily relate the term of immortality, the

issue that will be the focal point of this chapter, namely the notion of the subject. This notion is what unites and ties together the above issues to which Badiou and Žižek relate the term ‘immortal’ or ‘immortality’.<sup>207</sup>

In contrast to many of the significant continental philosophers in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, who have been critical if not directly dismissive of the subject, Badiou and Žižek are united in their insistence on and effort to renew this perhaps most fundamental notion of modern philosophy.<sup>208</sup> That said, the subject that we find in both Badiou’s and Žižek’s work has, as we shall see, very little in common with the notion of the subject that has been so heavily problematized in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>209</sup> Indeed, both of them consider their philosophical fidelity toward the subject to be perfectly compatible with the kind of critique launched by ‘theoretical anti-humanism’ against any notion of an autonomous, rational, self-transparent, or in short, ‘centred’, subject.<sup>210</sup> The subject proposed by Badiou and Žižek is by no means a return of the humanist configuration of

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<sup>207</sup> Let me just note as a preliminary clarification that my intention in what follows is *not* to give an exhaustive account of the theories of the subject in Badiou and Žižek. Rather, I want to apply their conceptualization of this notion and their explicit disagreements on the matter (which naturally entails introducing their conceptualization of the subject) as a way to elucidate their understanding of immortality and a number of issues related to this theme. As another consequence of this approach, I will not enter into a *general* discussion of the ‘subject’ or related notions such as the ‘self’ and ‘subjectivity’, which are very extensive and complex discussions.

<sup>208</sup> Badiou (MP 43) and Žižek (“Descartes and the Post-traumatic Subject,” 9) are fully in line with the well-known, predominate narrative of the Cartesian subject as the moment of inauguration of modern philosophy.

<sup>209</sup> With this intention to re-conceptualise and re-establish the subject as an indispensable philosophical notion, Badiou and Žižek are in a certain sense on par with the influential attempt led by German philosophers like Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank to counteract the so-called ‘death of the subject’ (Johnston, 2008b, 5-6; Grøn 1995, 123-124). But besides the insistence on maintaining the notion, there seems to be far more that separates than unites these two attempts to re-conceptualize the subject. Žižek comments explicitly on Henrich and Frank – with whom he shares an inspiration from German Idealism – in his essay “The Cartesian Subject versus the Cartesian Theatre” (247-248) and in *Enjoy your Symptom!* (EYS 86-89).

<sup>210</sup> On this issue, see the last chapter in Badiou’s book *The Century* (TC 163-178) and Žižek’s introduction to the anthology *Cogito and the Unconscious* (Žižek, “Introduction: Cogito as a Shibboleth,” 3-4).

Man, whose imminent disappearance was infamously predicted by Michel Foucault (2002, 420) on the closing pages of the *Order of Things*. On the other hand, both Badiou and Žižek are no less opposed to the (post)structuralist reduction of the subject to ‘subject-positions’, to the mere effect of discursive and institutional ‘interpellation’/‘subjectivation’.<sup>211</sup> Thus while both Badiou and Žižek, in different ways, introduce a theory in which the subject is re-conceptualized as fundamentally de-centred, and thus adhere to the new ‘Copernican turn’ enacted through Freud’s subject of the unconscious, they also both in their own way remain true to the basic Cartesian heritage of the cogito. Indeed, in their opinion there is no opposition between these two positions. In contrast to the traditional perception of the Freudian subject of the unconscious as anti-Cartesian, as the very undermining of the Cartesian illusion of a rational subject, Badiou (BE 431-432) and Žižek (e.g. TTS 62) are in full agreement with Lacan’s (1977, 47) claim that the Cartesian cogito is in fact the same as the psychoanalytical subject of the unconscious. As Žižek states in his introduction to *Cogito and the Unconscious*, a collection of essays on the Cartesian cogito and its reception in psychoanalysis:

Lacan’s underlying thesis here is even more radical than with the unconscious: not only has the Freudian subject nothing to do with the self-transparent, unified self-consciousness, it is the Cartesian subject itself [...]: the standard philosophy of subjectivity, as well as the critics of the notion of ‘unified transcendental subject’, both misrecognize [...] the gap that separates the Cartesian subject (when it is ‘brought to its notion’ with Kant) from the self-transparent ego, or from man, from the ‘human person’. What they fail to see is that the Cartesian subject emerges precisely out of the ‘death of man’: ‘transcendental subjectivity is philosophical antihumanism at its purest.’<sup>212</sup>

To summarize the account offered by Žižek (OB 133-135) in his book *On Belief* of this Lacanian claim that the Cartesian cogito is equal to the subject of the unconscious, we can say that what

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<sup>211</sup> See, for example, Žižek’s (SOI 173-178) discussion of the differences between a Lacanian and a post-structural notion of the subject in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

<sup>212</sup> Žižek, “Introduction: Cogito as a Shibboleth,” 3. When Žižek (FTKN 147) says that ‘the Cartesian cogito emerges out of death of man’ he refers to Descartes’ method of radical doubt as a gesture of self-withdrawal in which the subject is desubstantialized and reduced to a pure void.

Freud's subject of the unconscious has in common with the Cartesian cogito is basically the idea that the subject is not some kind of hard kernel, but rather a void, a point of pure negativity.<sup>213</sup> This void or gap that remains after the gesture of radical doubt, that cannot be fully identified with the Ego, is what Lacan refers to in his well-known saying that the subject (S) is 'barred' (\$). In both Badiou's and Žižek's case, the attempt to re-conceptualize the subject is to a large extent inspired by and closely linked to this Lacanian notion of the subject.<sup>214</sup>

All of the abovementioned general similarities aside, Badiou and Žižek, as I will try to demonstrate in the following, actually conceptualize the subject in quite different ways with substantial consequences. Anticipating things a bit one could say that their disagreement broadly has to do with the fact that, while Badiou (IT 62) in his conception of the process of subjectivation begins with an affirmation, the affirmation of something new in the situation, in Žižek's (TTS 159) view, the precondition for such an affirmation is a preceding negation, which he associates with the subject. Or, in other words, whereas the subject, according to Badiou, always succeeds (is a result of) an affirmation, in Žižek's terms the subject precedes (and enables) such an affirmation. This discrepancy will lead Žižek (TTS 158-167) to criticize Badiou for not being able to account properly for what it is more precisely that makes man capable of affirming

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<sup>213</sup> In the same passage in *On Belief* Žižek (OB 134-135) furthermore explains how Kant's 'transcendental apperception' functions as the 'vanishing mediator' between Descartes' cogito and Freud's subject of the unconscious, which elucidates his reference to Kant in the above quotation. While taking his lead from Lacan in relation to the parallel between the cogito and the subject of the unconscious, Žižek follows in the footsteps of Hegel (1989, 584) when he suggests that it was Kant who first raised the subject to the form of a notion (the 'transcendental apperception'). Žižek (TN 9-44) outlines the relationship between the Cartesian, Kantian (Hegelian) and Freudo-Lacanian subject in much greater detail in the first chapter of *Tarrying with the Negative*.

<sup>214</sup> Badiou (BE 1; LW 48) explicitly acknowledges his debt to Lacan on this issue both in *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*. Žižek (SOI 153-199) deals extensively with the issue of the Lacanian subject among other places in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. The other paramount source of inspiration in Žižek's conception of the subject is the philosophical tradition of German idealism. As he puts it in a recent interview: "[...] I just take literally Lacan's indication that the subject of psychoanalysis is the Cartesian cogito - of course, I would add, as reread by Kant, Schelling, and Hegel." Žižek, "Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek".

something new in a situation, which normally merely offers us endless repetition; or in Badiou's wording, what it is more specifically about the human animal that enables it to become an immortal subject of truth. As I have already implied (in chapter two), the Freudian notion of 'death drive'<sup>215</sup> will be at the centre of this discord between Badiou and Žižek, and in relation to this notion, also the (Kantian) theme of finitude considered by Badiou to be a contemporary remnant of religion.<sup>216</sup>

The notion of death drive moreover indicates a theologically relevant difference between Badiou and Žižek on the issue of immortality. Like Badiou, Žižek (PV 123) also associates the death drive with religion, or more precisely a 'theological dimension' in man, but he does so in a far more appreciatory way than Badiou, who, as I just said, associates the death drive with religion pejoratively by relating it to the theme of finitude. Furthermore, and once again in contrast to Badiou, Žižek does not relate the notion of death drive to human finitude, or at least not in Badiou's sense of the term; rather Žižek (PF 113; TTS 66, 390; PV 182; HRL 63) explicitly relates it to immortality. Which brings us to another aspect of this difference between Badiou and Žižek. Whereas Badiou (LW 513) explicitly emphasizes his distance from any theological idea of immortality, preferring instead to refer to philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and Nietzsche, Žižek (PV 123) apparently has no problem associating his considerations on immortality with a 'theological dimension'. This is not to imply that what really counts in the end is an explicit (positive) interest or involvement in theology. Rather, the essential underlying question in the following will be: Is there a lesson to be learned for theology, not merely on the issue of immortality, but particularly in relation to the issues of subjectivity and freedom from Badiou's and Žižek's supposedly 'non-theological' consideration on these matters?

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<sup>215</sup> Just to clarify: In the following I will for the sake of convenience adhere to Žižek's own practice of referring to the 'Freudian' notion of death drive, although a more fitting designation of Žižek's conception of the death drive would be 'Freudo-Lacanian', since Žižek in this case clearly reads Freud through Lacan. On Lacan's reading of the death drive see Dylan Evans (2010, 32-33).

<sup>216</sup> Stated more explicitly in Badiou's (BE 432; C 202; IT 86) terms his dispute with Lacan, and thus indirectly with Žižek, on the issue of the subject concerns the localization of the void (or in Lacanian vocabulary the Real) and more specifically whether the void should be localized in being or in the subject.

**‘Keep Going!’**

In his critical (but nonetheless appreciative) review essay, *The Subject Supposed to be a Christian* on Paul Ricoeur’s major work, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Badiou’s main argument is that the theory of the subject that Ricoeur unfolds in this book cannot be understood without its specific basis in Christian theology. Clearly this is also Badiou’s main complaint against Ricoeur; this is what he points out as the source of his disagreement with Ricoeur. Ricoeur’s subject is too entangled with the essential Christian themes of guilt and forgiveness.<sup>217</sup> In addition, Badiou considers it to be ‘a lack of civility’ that Ricoeur does not more openly adhere to this.<sup>218</sup>

However, it is obviously quite tempting to turn this accusation against Badiou himself. Indeed, at first impression Badiou’s accusation, his hostility toward the Christian theological basis of Ricoeur’s theory of subject, might if anything strike one as a ‘lack of civility’ considering that his book on Paul is perhaps his own best exemplification of what he understands by a ‘process of subjectivation’ in general. Moreover, when it comes to explaining this process in detail, that is, explaining its singular elements such as ‘intervention’, ‘fidelity’ and ‘decision’, he (BE 212-222; LW 425-435) seeks the assistance of two major theological thinkers, or as Badiou prefers ‘antiphilosophers’, namely Pascal and more lately Kierkegaard. So, to put it in an equally polemical manner: Perhaps it is Badiou’s own subject that is supposed to be a Christian? Or in other words, can Badiou’s own theory of the subject really be understood without including Christian theological notions such as ‘grace’, ‘leap of faith’, ‘belief’ and ‘immortality’?

As tempting as this suggestion might sound in the ears of a theologian, the answer is nevertheless no doubt positive: Badiou’s theory of the subject can be understood perfectly well without any reference whatsoever to theology or to Christianity.<sup>219</sup> Indeed, Badiou (LW 46) insists that his theory of

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<sup>217</sup> Badiou, “The Subject Supposed to be a Christian,” 6-9.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>219</sup> As is quite clear from his discussion of the notion of ‘fidelity’ in meditation twenty-four of *Being and Event*, Badiou (BE 254) primarily models this notion, not on Pascal’s Christian faith, but on mathematical deduction (See Hallward 2001b, 27). The same goes for his notion of ‘decision’; although he refers to Kierkegaard as an illustrative example, the

the subject, in contrast to a psychological, phenomenological or narrative conception of the subject, is essentially ‘formal’. ‘Formal’ here means, as he (LW 47) explains in *Logics of Worlds*, “[...] that ‘subject’ designates a system of forms and operations.”<sup>220</sup> This does not, of course, mean that this theory does not have a reminder to offer theology in regards to how the dynamics of (Christian) subjectivity might be understood and conceptualized. Not least, when we take into consideration that the ‘operations’ constituting Badiou’s subject are conceived first of all as a response to the question of what it means to be true to something, indeed to something which is not immediately verifiable by the normal standard of the situation. However, before we take a closer look at Badiou’s theory of the subject, let us first turn more explicitly to the question of immortality.

*‘We Must Live as Immortal’*

The issue concerning immortality introduced by Badiou on the very first page of *Logics of Worlds* is – even if in an indirect manner – at the very centre of the book and closely tied to the revised theory of the subject that Badiou presents in this work. This becomes quite apparent when Badiou (LW 507) in his conclusion states that now (i.e. against the backdrop of the whole book) he is in a position to answer the ‘daunting’ question: What is it to live? Immediately qualifying his statement by stressing that: “‘To live’ obviously not in the sense of democratic materialism [...], but rather in the sense of Aristotle’s enigmatic formula: to live ‘as an Immortal’.” As this quote clearly indicates, the reference to immortality has to be understood as part of Badiou’s (LW 1) attempt to disassociate himself from today’s ‘natural belief’ of democratic materialism characterized by the assertion that ‘there is only bodies and language’, or in short ‘the dogma of our finitude’. Although there has occurred a

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main resource in his conceptualization of this notion (presented in the section “Theory of Points” in *Logics of Worlds*) is the mathematical discipline of topology.

<sup>220</sup> There is nevertheless a conspicuous ambiguity or tension in Badiou’s conception of the subject between his rigid formalistic language of mathematics, and his vivid exemplifications/illustrations and unmistakable existentialist pathos (signalled also by his references to Pascal, Kierkegaard and Sartre). Indeed, Badiou has himself suggested in a comment on the notion of subject that his project might be described as “[...] something like a Sartrean thought of mathematics [...]”. Badiou, “Can Change Be Thought? A Dialog with Alain Badiou,” 242.

slight shift in terminology, the immediate context of Badiou's (E 7) employment of the term 'immortal' in *Logics of Worlds* is thus basically the same as in his 1993 book *Ethics* in which his frequent references to the immortal nature of man are part of a ferocious polemic against what he (E 11) sees as the attempt of the contemporary 'ethical ideology' to reduce man to a (victimized) mortal animal.<sup>221</sup> In short, Badiou's celebration of immortality has to be understood in relation to his critique of what I in chapter two termed 'the metaphysics of finitude'. This also gives us a first preliminary clue to Badiou's comprehension of the term 'immortal'. Insofar as Badiou (B29; NN 36, 86; C 99) considers the motif of finitude to be a remnant of religion, his use of the term 'immortal' as an opposition to this motif, seems to indicate that he takes 'immortal' to mean something quite different than in its traditional sense in which it has strong religious connotations. So, what does Badiou actually mean by 'immortal'? And why does he, in what seems as an almost self-contradictory manner, insist on using this 'religious' term (indeed along with other religious terms such as 'grace', 'resurrection', and 'eternity') in his critique of the religious motif of finitude?

In his discussion of the abovementioned 'daunting' question in the conclusion of *Logics of Worlds* Badiou (LW 513) explicitly rejects that the reference to immortality should be taken in any religious sense: "I need neither God nor the divine. I believe that it is here and now that we rouse or resurrect ourselves as Immortals." In other words, 'immortal' in Badiou's conception of the term is referring to something we are in this present world, in this present life, and not to something we might become in some future metaphysical afterlife. To live as Immortal, as Badiou understands it, has to do with and is part of human life itself. And thus man's mortality does *not* prevent that he might also 'live as an immortal'. As Badiou declares in *Ethics*: "The fact that in the end we all die, that only dust remains, in no way alters Man's identity as immortal at the instant in which he affirms himself as someone who runs counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances may expose him." On the other hand Badiou (LW

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<sup>221</sup> In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou (LW 2) levels the precise same objection against democratic materialism: "In order to validate the equation 'existence = individual = body', contemporary *doxa* must valiantly reduce humanity to an overstretched vision of animality."



511) does, as this quote indicates, nevertheless insist that to live as an immortal is something quite different than to live our ordinary human life, that the immortal dimension of man cannot be entirely reduced to his humanity, that there is a part in man which exceeds his humanity. Paradoxically it is, according to Badiou (LW 511; cf. E 16), precisely this excessive, ‘inhuman’, as he puts it, part in us that makes us distinctively human. That is, it is (only) through a certain inhuman trait that the human animal distinguishes itself from other animals.<sup>222</sup> According to the conception of the human that Badiou (LW 507-514) presents in the conclusion of *Logics of Worlds*, the human being is thought of both as an internal difference, in the sense that a human is always also not human or ‘inhuman’, and as an external difference, in the sense that this internal difference sets the human animal apart from all other animals.<sup>223</sup> Thus, proper human life, i.e. immortal life in Badiou’s terms, is a kind of life which in a certain sense is external or alien to the existence of the individual who lives this life.<sup>224</sup>

To put it another way, man is characterized by an inherent split. Man is, as Badiou (SP 55-57, 63-64) makes particularly clear in his book on Paul, divided between two modes of existence or two ways of life. On the one hand man lives the purely ‘survivalist’ life of a mortal animal in which he is basically dictated by his self-interests and desires. This is the way of life that Badiou (SP 79) in *Saint Paul* designates with Paul as the ‘path of the flesh’; that is, a way of life in which we are delivered to ‘the repetitive automatism of a desire’. And like Paul, in the famous passage on sin and law in *Romans 7*, Badiou (LW 510; E 43, 90) also associates this path or way of life with death insofar that he in *Logics of World* as well as in *Ethics* relates it to the notion of ‘death drive’.<sup>225</sup> On the other hand man can, Badiou asserts, also live life as immortal (in Pauline terms

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<sup>222</sup> See also the last chapter in *The Century* on this aspect of inhumanity in man (TC 173-178).

<sup>223</sup> For an elaboration of this argument see Ed Pluth, “Alain Badiou, Kojève, and the Return of the Human Exception.”

<sup>224</sup> Badiou shares this definition of the human as a being who is alienated from himself, who is characterized by an inherent split, with Freud-Lacanian psychoanalysis and thus also with Žižek. But as we shall see in the following Badiou and Žižek conceptualize this split quite differently.

<sup>225</sup> As mentioned in chapter two, Badiou and Žižek have quite diverging readings of this notion. I will return to the question of how this difference is expressed in their conceptions of the subject at the end of this chapter.

life according to the ‘path of the spirit’). The immortal way of life is what makes it possible for us to break away from a life in which we are dictated solely by our desires; or as Badiou (LW 509) states: “[Immortal] Life is what gets the better of drives.” To live according to this way of life ‘as immortal’ is in Badiou’s (LW 71, 86; E 12, 16, 40, 59) vocabulary more precisely to be a ‘subject of truth’. Or, as he (LW 86) puts it in *Logics of Worlds*, “[...] through the discipline demanded by participating in a truth, the human animal will be accorded the chance [...] of an Immortal becoming.” And it is this capacity and experience of an immortal becoming by participating in a truth that constitutes the abovementioned inhuman part in us, which according to Badiou defines humanity as such (LW 71).<sup>226</sup> Although Badiou in a certain sense opposes these two ways, and clearly subordinates the first to the second, one cannot have the second way of life, as Badiou (E 84) stresses, without the first: “The Immortal exists only in and by the mortal animal.” That is to say, even if we can transcend mere mortality and live as immortal, this does not mean that we can negate absolutely our mortality.<sup>227</sup> We will, in our immortality, be split between a mortal and an immortal way of life. The proper universal form of the subject is, as Badiou (SP 64) points out in *Saint Paul*, a ‘divided subject’. If, as I have just argued, what Badiou understands by living as an immortal is equal to being a subject of truth, then we will obviously need to take a closer look at Badiou’s conception of the subject. But before I do that, let me just point out a few other interesting features of Badiou’s notion of immortality.

Strictly speaking, in Badiou’s perspective, man *is* not immortal and he *is* not a (divided) subject of truth, rather this is something he *might become*, but only insofar that an event happens. A fact which means that man’s immortality hangs on the chance of the occurrence of an event. This has, as Badiou

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<sup>226</sup> The reason that Badiou uses the ‘term’ inhuman about the human capacity and experience of truth is not merely to suggest that through truth man can become something more or other than human; the term also seems to refer to the power that truth has over man. As he explains in *Ethics*: “Unfortunately, one cannot simply ‘renounce’ a truth. The denial of the Immortal in myself is something quite different from an abandonment, a cessation: I must always convince myself that the Immortal in question *never existed* [...]. For the Immortal, if I recognize its existence, calls on me to continue; it has the eternal power of the truths that induce it.”

<sup>227</sup> In *Ethics* Badiou (E 83-84) describes how any attempt to do this by forcing truth to its absolute always ends in terror.

(LW 512) admits in the conclusion of *Logics of Worlds*, given rise to some objections against him from critics who “[...] see in this ‘luck’ [*chance*] the mark of an aristocratism, a transcendent arbitrariness—of the kind that has always been linked to the doctrines of Grace.” Against such objections Badiou (LW 514) maintains the metaphor of grace and insists that: “Several times in its brief existence, every human animal is granted the chance to incorporate itself into the subjective present of a truth. The grace of living for an Idea [...] is accorded to everyone and for several types of procedure.” Badiou’s argument here seems to be that the events which enable us to become subjects of truth are not that rare after all. An additional counter-argument is presented by Badiou in *Saint Paul* where he in the conclusion of the book denies that to become a subject we will have to wait for an event to happen. This is not the case, because, as he (SP 111) stresses, “Many events, even very distant ones, still require us to be faithful to them.” Furthermore, as the last part of the above passage from *Logics of Worlds* clearly suggests, Badiou conceives the gracious element of an event along the line of a Pauline notion of grace, that is, a notion of universal grace in which the possibility to become a subject of truth is something that is ‘accorded to everyone’.

Besides inaugurating the process of a truth, and thus constituting the absolutely necessary condition for becoming a subject, an event is also what institutes the division between the mortal way of life of the human animal and the immortal way of life of a subject of truth. And it is worth noting that Badiou here once again finds an illustrative model of his thought (of an ‘evental’ division of man) in the Pauline letters. More precisely, Badiou locates the core of this model of the split subject in Paul’s declaration in *Romans* 6:14 that the resurrection event entails that man is *not* under the law, which indicates the path of the flesh, *but* under grace, which indicates the path of the spirit. “We maintain”, as Badiou (SP 63-64) puts it, “that evental rupture always constitutes its subject in the divided form of a ‘not...but’, and that *it is precisely this form that bears the universal*.”<sup>228</sup> With this issue of the event as the ground of the

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<sup>228</sup> As Badiou states explicitly in a recent interview, he finds that Paul ‘explains in a very pure manner’ the three central elements which Badiou takes to be fundamental in conceptualizing the subject: the dependence on an event, the process of subjectivization and the construction of a universal

divided subject we touch upon the important question concerning the role of, and relationship between, negation and affirmation in Badiou's theory of the subject. I do not wish go into the details of this complex question, I merely want to stress a – to the present context – relevant point which Badiou also indicates in his treatment of the Pauline formula of 'not...but'. Namely that even if living life 'as immortal', as a subject of truth, clearly involves a negation of the ordinary state of things ('not' under law), it is nevertheless a primarily affirmative way of life in the sense that it is only through the affirmation of an exceptional truth and event upon which this truth is based ('but' under grace) that man finally becomes an immortal subject of truth.<sup>229</sup>

Although the immortal life that man might attain by becoming a subject of truth consists in a way of life intrinsic to our mortal life and not in some sort of eternal afterlife, it nevertheless involves a different mode of time. In chapter five in his book *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* Badiou discusses the question of time and truth in detail. Contrasting himself to Deleuze who, according to Badiou (D 64), conceptualizes truth in terms of memory and thus as continuity, Badiou (D 64-65) insists that truth should be thought of as a radical interruption in time, and thus more in terms of forgetting than memory. He describes this particular form of forgetting that he associates with truth and the experience of this forgetting in the following way:

[...] this forgetting is not the simple forgetting of this or that, but the forgetting of time itself: the moment when we live as if time (*this* time) had never existed, or, in conformity with the profound maxim of Aristotle, as if we were immortal [...]. This, to my mind, is the real experience of (political) revolutions, (amorous) passions, (scientific) interventions, and (artistic) creations. It is in this abolition of time that is engendered the eternity of truth.

Thus, the time of immortality is eternity, but the eternity of a specific truth, which according to Badiou is always a concrete process of creation. Indeed, as Badiou (LW 512) states in *Logics*

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truth. Badiou, "A Discussion of and around Incident at Antioch: An Interview with Alain Badiou," 7.

<sup>229</sup> Badiou presents a short but instructive account of his view on the relationship between negation and affirmation in terms of his theory of the subject in a debate with Simon Critchley on the latter's book *Infinitely Demanding*. See Badiou, "Comments on Simon Critchley's *Infinitely Demanding*," 16.

of *Worlds*: “[...] truths are eternal because they have been created and not because they have been there forever.” In contrast to ordinary ‘historical’ time which has precisely ‘been there forever’, Badiou’s ‘eternality’ is a rupture with or cut in the flow of historical time established through the creation of a truth (of something genuinely new), thereby transcending this flow, overcoming its historical context.<sup>230</sup>

Let me end this section with a brief remark on Badiou’s apparently paradoxical use of terms with strong religious connotations such as ‘immortality’ and ‘grace’. In his short essay ‘Alain Badiou, Kojève, and the Return of the Human Exception’ on the conclusion of *Logics of Worlds*, Ed Pluth (2009, 197; 202) suggests that the revival of such religious terms in Badiou’s philosophy should be taken as an ironic gesture. Pluth supports (2009, 203) this assertion by arguing that: “Just as Badiou talks about his theory of the infinite as a banalization and secularization of what had always had religious connotations, he could say he is doing the same for the religious terms that evoke what was formerly sacred about human life. He renders immortality and eternity banal, in a sense. He makes resurrection trivial and ordinary.” I believe that Pluth is quite right in asserting that Badiou intends to secularize these terms which are usually associated with religion; indeed in the case of grace, Badiou (SP 66) states so explicitly himself. However, I do not think that Badiou necessarily is ironic in his treatment of these terms or that he wants to render them banal, trivial or ordinary. On the contrary, I think that viewed against the backdrop of Badiou’s insistent effort to re-establish the autonomy of philosophy, his treatment of these terms should be taken quite seriously. Namely as an attempt to exploit their forcefulness in this effort by inducing them with a new, not religious, but philosophical meaning. Let us now turn to Badiou’s conception of the subject.

### *A Subject to Truth*

Badiou (BE 391; HI 55) opens the thirty-fifth meditation in *Being and Event* entitled ‘Theory of the Subject’ with the following brief, but also rather dense, definition of a subject: “I term *subject* any local configuration of a generic procedure from which a truth is supported.” Almost twenty years later in *Logics*

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<sup>230</sup> Badiou (LW 9-33) explains his conception of eternal (truths) in detail in the long preface to *Logics of World*.

of *World*, Badiou (LW 47) confirms this definition, in a more straightforward formulation: “[...] a subject is ultimately nothing but the local agent of a truth [...].”<sup>231</sup> As both these short quotes clearly imply, according to Badiou (LW 50), a subject is always a subject of truth. We are only ever subjects in relation to a local (finite) production of a generic (infinite) truth.<sup>232</sup> In other words, if there is no process of truth there is no subject, insofar that the subject according to the above definition *is* a ‘local configuration of a truth-procedure’. The subject never pre-exists the process of truth (E 43). In a certain sense, a truth thus always precedes the subject as Badiou also puts it.<sup>233</sup> The same goes for Badiou’s philosophical conceptualization of these notions: His theory of truth precedes his theory of the subject, which is also clearly manifest in the architecture of *Being and Event*. This means that to be able to really grasp what Badiou means by the term ‘subject’ we will have to take a closer look at his conceptualization of truth. Or, as Badiou emphasizes in a short essay on his notion of the subject from 1989: “To conceptualize the subject [...] makes no sense except from the point of view of a doctrine of truth which has been so completely recast as to go well beyond the critique of correspondence theories, and to out-radicalize hermeneutics of unveiling.”<sup>234</sup>

The fulcrum of Badiou’s conception of truth is a (Platonic) distinction between truth and knowledge, which, as he (BE 327;

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<sup>231</sup> See Bosteels (2009 xxiii-xxvi) for a useful outline of some of the displacements and continuations in Badiou’s theory of the subject from *Theory of the Subject* through *Being and Event* to *Logics of Worlds*. I focus on the two latest books in which Badiou presents his theory of the subject in the same distinct conceptual language, which (on the whole) has characterized his philosophy ever since the publication of *Being and Event*.

<sup>232</sup> Let me just restate that according to Badiou (BE 392), a subject of truth does not merely designate an individual subject; rather it can also be a collective or even a mixture of individuals and a collective. While love obviously only affects the two individuals concerned, politics only concerns a collective dimension (the political subject is purely collective). Science and art, on the other hand, involve a ‘mixed’ subject.

<sup>233</sup> Badiou, “On a Finally Objectless Subject,” 93.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 94. Here Badiou (ibid., 94-95) also lists the five following definitions of the subject, which his own (the above stated) formalistic definition of the subject precludes: “(a) A subject is not a substance. [...] (b) Nor is a subject an empty point. [...] (c) A subject is in no sense the organizing of a meaning of experience. It is not a transcendental function. [...] (d) A subject is not an invariant of presentation. [...] (e) A subject is neither a result nor an origin.”

MP 73, 93; C 134; IT 61, 178) stresses on several occasions, is an absolutely crucial feature, not merely of his own philosophy, but of any philosophy worthy of the name.<sup>235</sup> Knowledge, as Badiou (BE 328-329) defines it, is in short the identification and classification (by the means of language) of the different elements of a situation based on a capacity to judge. While knowledge is thus basically (a vital part of) what constitutes and upholds the stability, consistency and order of the situation, a truth is, as Badiou (BE 327; cf. MP 37, 80; E 70; C 134) repeatedly states with reference to Lacan, “[...] always that which makes a hole in a knowledge.” More precisely, this ‘hole’ in knowledge is made through what Badiou places under the slightly differing titles of ‘generic procedures’, ‘procedures of subtraction’ or simply ‘truth-procedures’. Based on his distinction between knowledge and truth, Badiou’s (IT 61) conceptualization of this procedure could be described in preliminary terms as a theory about how ‘something new’, which does not comply with the order of knowledge of the situation, is produced, gradually entailing a displacement of the epistemological register of the situation and point by point enforcing its recognition as part of this situation and hereby also producing new knowledge or what Badiou (TW 133) calls ‘veridicalities’.<sup>236</sup> This indicates another crucial feature of Badiou’s (IT 61) conception of truth: truth is a process, ‘truth is a path’, as he expresses it with reference to Hegel.

However, my description so far obviously lacks a crucial element of Badiou’s conception of the process of truth. Just as the process of truth is what makes a subject possible, the absolutely necessary precondition in order for a process of truth to begin is, according to Badiou (TW 114), that something

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<sup>235</sup> Badiou (BE 295-314, 355-387) provides a quite complicated argument for this distinction based on modern set theory in *Being and Event*. He (TW 127) summarizes the essence of this argument in the short text *Truth: Forcing and the Unnameable*: “There can be no doubt that the opposition between constructible sets and generic sets provides a purely immanent ontological basis for the opposition between knowledge and truth.”

<sup>236</sup> In this sense Badiou’s theory of truth also offers an epistemology, an explanation of the emergence of new knowledge. As Badiou (E 62) emphasizes: “A truth punches a ‘hole’ in knowledges, it is heterogeneous to them, but it is also the sole known source of new knowledge.” Let me just emphasize that this new knowledge, which Badiou (BE 329-331) terms ‘veridicity’, is not to be confused with truth as such. Truth is not a matter of (adequate) knowledge or of illumination, but of intervention.

happens; to be exact, that the normal situation is supplemented, as Badiou (e.g. TW 124; HI 55) would say, by the occurrence of an event. This is a decisive feature separating truth from knowledge (MP 36):

The truth or generic procedures stand out from the cumulation of fields of knowledge by their *eventful origin*. As long as nothing happens, besides from that which conforms to the rules of a state of things, there can admittedly be cognition, correct statements, accumulated knowledge; there cannot be truth.

Yet, although Badiou (BE 182; TW 101) certainly perceives an event as ‘a point of rupture’ with the ordinary state of things, as something that ‘does not belong’ to the situation, it is nevertheless not the event as such, which ‘makes a hole in knowledge’. Rather, what the event does is that it makes manifest ‘for the duration of a lighting flash’ the void that according to Badiou’s (BE 52-59; cf. HI 55) mathematical ontology grounds the situation, but which cannot be represented or ‘counted’ as anything but nothing in the situation.<sup>237</sup> What makes a hole in knowledge is the bringing of this void into being in the form of what Badiou (in terms of ontology) calls a ‘generic multiplicity’ or a ‘generic subset’, through the subtraction of a truth-procedure. In an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, Badiou instructively sums up the process that I have just described in the following way: “For me, the void is the heart of every situation. But this is perfectly thinkable by the means of the purest rationality, that is, mathematics. I’d add that a great event [...] is precisely what renders the void manifest in the situation. A truth envelops this void; it presents it in the situation in which it was formerly unrepresented.”<sup>238</sup> In this (infinite) process of creating a generic multiplicity and thus ‘subtracting’ a truth from knowledge a subject emerges. Indeed,

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<sup>237</sup> That nothing is what grounds the situation does not mean that the situation is not grounded in being, in so far that “[...] being-nothing is as distinct from non-being as the ‘there is’ is distinct from being” (BE 53).

<sup>238</sup> It is important to note here that what, strictly speaking, is ‘presented’ in the situation is not the generic multiplicity of truth as such; insofar that the latter is incomplete in its infinite composition it cannot be stated (we cannot know) what truth *is*. What can nevertheless be stated (what we can know) is what *will have been* if a truth attains completion. This is what Badiou (BE 401; TW 133) refers to as ‘veridicalities’ or ‘forced statements’, which is elements of knowledge that are simultaneously connected and disconnected with truth (entailing a reorganization of the knowledge of the situation).



the subject emerges as a finite moment within this infinite process, as a ‘local configuration of a truth-procedure’. So, wherein does this process more precisely consist? Or in other words: In what does a truth-procedure consist?

The process of truth always begins, as I have just stressed, with a situation being supplemented by an event. One of Badiou’s (BE 182; TW 114-115, 124; IT 62) recurrent definitions of an event is, as we know, that it is what is ‘undecidable’ from within the situation in which it happens. As he (IT 62) explains in a lecture from 1999: “Take the statement: ‘This event belongs to the situation.’ If it is possible to decide, using the rules of established knowledge, whether this statement is true or false, then the so-called event is not an event.” According to Badiou (IT 62; cf. BE 201) the undecidable nature of the event, the fact that it cannot be determined through the knowledge of the situation in which it happens, means that “A *wager* will have to be made.” The undecidable event will have to be decided in a ‘leap of faith’ as Hallward (2003, 126) describes it. A subject is the one who makes this decision, the one who risks this leap of faith. Or, in Badiou’s (IT 62) words: “To begin with, a subject is what fixes an event, because he or she takes the chance of deciding upon it.” Set against this background it cannot come as a surprise that Badiou in his elaborations on the relationship between decision, truth and subject in *Logics of Worlds* summons Kierkegaard as the key-witness to his conception of the decision, his ‘theory of points’. Certifying his concordance with the latter, Badiou (LW 432) thus states that: “[...] Kierkegaard understands just as we do that the decision imposed by the treatment of a point—the occurrence of the choice—is truly the moment when one has the chance of incorporating oneself into a process of truth [...].”<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Let me just note in passing, Simon Critchley’s critique of Badiou on this point. Critchley (2000, 24; 2008, 1933) has on several occasions accused Badiou of what he call a ‘heroism of the decision’. Badiou responded to this critique in a short commentary essay on Critchley’s book *Infinitely Demanding*. Here he makes clear that while he agrees with Critchley to oppose any kind of ‘Heideggerian pathos of authenticity’ (the origin of which he (LW 428) in *Logics of Worlds* locates in Kierkegaard), he is nevertheless of the opinion that it is possible to have a heroism without any notion of authenticity. Or, as Badiou puts it: “I define heroism as the possibility for an individual to become a subject. [...] And there is some heroism, not at all because it is much more authentic to be a subject than to be an individual or something like that, but simply because the becoming-

This decision or choice in which an individual incorporates himself into a process of truth is also, finally, what Badiou (HI 54) means by freedom. Freedom is to choose truth as an affirmation of the pure chance of an event and to stay true to this choice; in short: to be a subject of truth. In Badiou's conception, freedom is thus, as Hallward (2003, 167) notes, 'an exceptional and fragile achievement' without any ontological foundation or guarantee; something which on the contrary needs to be upheld through the labour of a subject. Hence, in terms of the classical distinction between 'negative' freedom (as the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints) and 'positive' freedom (as the capacity of autonomous action) Badiou's (LW 34) conception clearly belongs to the latter. Yet, this is not to imply that Badiou thinks that freedom is absolutely unbounded, that it is not associated with any constrictions. On the contrary, once a choice is made, the subject is in a sense completely determined, bound by its choice, insofar that the subject must submit itself to certain restrictions and measures of discipline to realize and uphold its choice. Mathematics also serves as the model for Badiou in this matter: "In mathematics we have first a kind of primitive freedom which is the freedom of the choice of axioms. But after that, we have a complete determination, along some logical rules. So we have thoroughly to accept the consequences of our first choice. And this acceptance is not freedom, but constraint, necessity, hard intellectual work to find the correct proof."<sup>240</sup> But, this is not the only thing that limits the freedom of the subject: Even though it is the subject who freely decides the event and hereby inaugurates a process of subjectivation, the possibility of becoming a subject does not strictly speaking depend on us, but on the chance that an event occurs in the first place.

It is, as I have already indicated, this dependence on an element of chance or contingency that Badiou refers to when he resorts to the theological term 'grace' as a designation of the event. Commenting on his use of this term in an interview with Peter Hallward, Badiou explains that: "What interests me in

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subject goes beyond the popular limits of our existence as individuals." (Badiou, On Simon Critchley's *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*," 159). In other words, Badiou's claim seems to be that his use of the notions 'individual' and 'subject' is value-free, un-biased. I think that any reader of *Logics of Worlds* or *Ethics* would hesitate to confirm such an assertion.

<sup>240</sup> Badiou, "Democracy, Politics, Philosophy: an obscure knot."

Saint Paul is the idea – very explicit in his writings – that the becoming of a truth, the becoming of a subject, depends entirely on a pure event, which is itself beyond all the predictions and calculations that our understanding is capable of.”<sup>241</sup> Of course, Badiou (cf. SP 66) stresses that he uses ‘grace’ in a laicized sense. Such a laicized notion of grace is, as he puts it, “Simply, [...] a grace that requires no all powerful, no divine transcendence.”<sup>242</sup> Thus, our dependency on an event should not be understood in (orthodox) ‘theological’ terms: the chance of an event emerges, not because it is given to us by someone or something (transcendent, divine), but only because there is literally *nothing* in which it can be grounded. In the interview with Hallward, Badiou justifies his distinction between a religious and a laicized notion of grace through a reference to the incalculability, or contingency, of the event: “[...] if every grace is a divine gift, we cannot avoid the idea of an ultimate, divine calculation, even if that calculation exceeds our understanding.”<sup>243</sup> Yet, Badiou’s characterization of the event as gracious still bears with it the connotations of *redemption* in the sense that what the contingent event offers us is the chance of being something more than (it redeems us from being) merely a living animal determined by our ordinary interests, the chance to

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<sup>241</sup> Badiou, “Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou,” 125.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid. To some such a laicized, or as Badiou (SP 66) puts it elsewhere, ‘materialist’, notion of grace is simply meaningless. Thus, in an article on Badiou, John Milbank (2007, 134) claims that: “To speak of grace without God can only mean to speak apophatically of God.” I disagree. As I have argued in the previous chapter, I find that the opposition between Christian theology and materialism is a false one. Not only do I think it is possible to have a (materialist) notion of grace without God, I also think it is possible to reconcile a materialist notion of grace with God, but not with the absolute, transcendent God, which according to Milbank (2009, 111) is the only true God. Milbank (2005, 396) does not reject the compatibility of theology and materialism; indeed in his essay “Materialism and Transcendence” he argues that any real non-reductive materialism necessarily must be grounded in theology, but precisely in an (orthodox catholic) theology in which God is absolute and transcendent. However, as noted by Clayton Crockett (2006, 556) in a critical comment on Milbank’s essay: “If matter must be ontologically grounded outside itself, then its designation as materialism seems to be a stretch and may even do violence to the term.”

<sup>243</sup> Badiou, “Politics and Philosophy – An interview with Alain Badiou,” 124.

transcend ourselves and become a subject of truth.<sup>244</sup> It is the world in which the happening of events is possible that “[...] saves us from every finite dis-grace” as Badiou put it on the last page of *Logics of Worlds*.

To return to my exposition of the process of truth, we can say in sum that the wager of deciding that an event has taken place is what inaugurates the subject as a ‘local configuration of a truth-procedure’. However, deciding the event is far from the only thing it takes to become a subject of truth. In brief, Badiou (BE 223-245, 410-430; TW 105-120; IT 58-68) organizes the process of subjectivization implicated in a truth-procedure in three interconnected gestures or operations: ‘intervention’, ‘fidelity’ and ‘forcing’. So, how are we to understand these three operations, in what do they consist?

I have already accounted for the essential part of what Badiou understands by ‘intervention’, namely the gesture of deciding that the event belongs to the situation. However, it needs to be added that this decision cannot be reduced to a private affair of the subject; the event must be decided publically by ‘naming’ it, as for example Paul, according to Badiou (SP 88), names the Christ-event ‘resurrection’. Insofar that from the perspective of the situation it remains questionable if there has been an event or not, an intervention is, as Badiou (BE 207) notes, always illegal, except to the subject who intervenes, who makes a leap of faith and decides that the event belongs to the situation by naming it. The ‘nomination’ or naming of the event is thus the ‘material evidence’, as Badiou (SP 88) put is, of a decision, and the inauguration of a process of subjectivation which constitutes the only trace of the vanished event.

This trace of the event is extended through the fidelity of the subject to the vanished event. More precisely, the operation of fidelity basically consists in discerning and grouping together the elements of a situation by examining or inquiring about their connection or non-connection to the name of the event. Comparing fidelity to the count-as-one operation, Badiou (BE 329) explains that the operation of fidelity: “[...] designates *another mode of discernment*: one which, outside knowledge but within the effect of an interventional nomination, explores the connections to the supernumerary name of the event.” And he (BE 32)) elaborates: “When I recognize that *a* multiple which belongs to the situation [...] is connected—or not—to the name

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 129.

of the event I perform the *minimal* gesture of fidelity [...].” Fidelity is thus the operation of examining the situation from the perspective of the event, and thereby creating a new organization of the situation, like a counter-state or sub-state, as Badiou (BE 233) puts it. This furthermore implies, in the words of Badiou (BE 233), that “There is always something institutional in a fidelity [...].” In *Being and Event*, one of Badiou’s recurrent examples of such an ‘institutional’ operator of fidelity is the church. As he (BE 392) explains: “In Christianity, the church is that through which connections and disconnections to the Christ-event are evaluated [...]. As Pascal puts it, the church is therefore literally ‘the history of truth’ since it is the operator of faithful connection and it supports the ‘religious’ generic procedure.”<sup>245</sup> Badiou (BE 392) moreover suggests that the heresies in the history of Christianity could be explained as deriving from the always present suspicion that an operator of fidelity (the church) is not itself faithful to the (Christ-) event of which it is a trace. So in sum, it is quite clear that to Badiou (BE 329; SP 14) fidelity is neither a subjective capacity nor a matter of knowledge or illumination, but an organizing activity of a subject, or as he puts it, “[...] the work of a militant.”

However, this does not mean that being a subject of truth is a matter that does not concern knowledge at all. In fact, the operation forming the third and final part of the process of subjectivation involved in a truth-procedure does indeed have to do with knowledge insofar that this operation concerns the matter of what can be stated about truth in the situation, and how such statements are produced. Badiou refers to this operation as ‘forcing’ because it is based upon a method of that name developed by the mathematician Paul Cohen. In the abovementioned lecture from 1999 Badiou (IT 65; cf. BE 400-403) gives the following condensed explanation of forcing:

[...] we can always *anticipate* the idea of a completed generic truth. The generic being of a truth is never presented. A truth is uncompletable. But what we can know, on a formal level, is that a truth will always have taken place as a generic infinity. This allows the possible fictioning of the effects of such a truth having-taken-place. That is, the subject can make the hypothesis of a Universe wherein this truth, of which the subject is a local point, will have

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<sup>245</sup> As I noticed in chapter one, it quite clearly appears here as if Badiou considers religion to be a (domain of) truth-procedure on par with politics, science, art and love. See also Boer (2009, 163-165).

completed its generic totalization. I call the anticipatory hypothesis of the generic being of a truth, a *forcing*. A forcing is the powerful fiction of a *completed* truth. Starting with such a fiction, I can *force* new bits of knowledge, without even *verifying* this knowledge.

Such bits of forced knowledge are, as I have already mentioned, what Badiou (BE 401; TW 133) calls ‘veridicalities’ or ‘forced statements’. In this perspective the theological body of knowledge or fictions grouped under the title of ‘eschatology’ might be considered as an example of such a forced statement.<sup>246</sup>

Now we are in a position to understand more precisely Badiou’s definition of a subject. That the subject is a ‘local configuration of the truth-procedure’ basically means that Badiou conceives of the subject in terms of the three above-described gestures or operations of ‘intervention’, ‘fidelity’ and ‘forcing’. A subject is the one who intervenes in the situation by deciding that the undecidable event belongs to the situation; the one who exercises fidelity towards the event by relating to the situation as someone that, because he wagers on the event, will begin to examine the situation in the perspective of the event, that is, to discern the elements in the situation that are connected or non-connected to the name of the event; and the one who forces into knowledge what truth will have been if it was completed.

### **‘Fail Again. Fail Better.’**

The question of the subject is indisputably one of most central and persistent issues in Žižek’s wide-ranging writings on philosophy, psychoanalysis, politics, culture, theology etc. It is moreover among the more consistent notions in his philosophy. His two main resources for conceptualizing the subject are, as I have already indicated, Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis and the philosophy of German Idealism – above all Hegel. Thus, Žižek has on several occasions emphasized that his most urgent project is to shed light on how the conceptions of subjectivity in these two traditions – the Freudo-Lacanian ‘death drive’ and the German Idealist ‘self-relating negativity’ (condensed in the famous formula  $I = I$ ) – are in fact complementary. Or, as he recounts it in his unmistakable style in an interview from 2003:

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<sup>246</sup> With Exodus (ch. 1-15) as his example, Roland Boer (2006, 113-115) suggests something along these lines in his reading of the notion of ‘forcing’ in his article “On Fables and Truths.”

If you were to ask me at gunpoint, like Hollywood producers who are too stupid to read books and say, ‘give me the punchline,’ and were to demand, ‘Three sentences. What are you really trying to do?’ I would say, Screw ideology. Screw movie analyses. What really interests me is the following insight: if you look at the very core of psychoanalytic theory, of which even Freud was not aware, it’s properly read death drive – this idea of beyond the pleasure principle, self-sabotaging, etc. – the only way to read this properly is to read it against the background of the notion of subjectivity as self-relating negativity in German Idealism. That is to say, I just take literally Lacan’s indication that the subject of psychoanalysis is the Cartesian cogito – of course, I would add, as reread by Kant, Schelling, and Hegel.<sup>247</sup>

In the first part of the following outline of Žižek’s conception of the subject the focus will be on how we should understand Žižek’s above-quoted claim that Luther, or more broadly Protestantism, constitutes the predecessor of the notion of modern subjectivity that was initiated in its rudimentary form by Descartes and fully elaborated by the German idealists (above all by Hegel) and in Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis. In the second and most extensive part of the outline, the focus will be on the notion of death drive as another term for this notion of modern subjectivity, first of all because Žižek (TTS 66; PV 182) explicitly relates this notion, which he (PV 123) refers to as a ‘theological dimension’, to the themes of freedom and immortality, but also because it plays an important part in Žižek’s critical discussion of Badiou’s theory of the subject. However, I will begin by developing a little further my brief remarks in the beginning of the chapter on Žižek’s theory of the subject in general.

Following Lacan, Žižek makes an important distinction between the self or the ‘ego’, that is, the symbolic identity produced through various processes of subjectivation, and the subject as that which eludes this identification. This distinction reflects the basic insight of Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis: There is an unconscious subject adhering to a logic, which, far from being arbitrary or irrational, does not correspond to the ego, and which is not disclosed through self-consciousness, but manifests itself in phenomena such as dreams and slips of the tongue. These two notions designate two different aspects of

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<sup>247</sup> Žižek, “Liberration Hurts - An Interview with Slavoj Žižek”. See also: and *Conversations with Žižek* (CWZ 61) and Žižek, “Humanism is Not Enough - An Interview with Slavoj Žižek”.

subjectivity. More precisely, according to Žižek (TTS 159), ‘subjectivity’ is the name for the ‘irreducible circularity’ between the two aspects of ‘subjectivation’ as the process through which our symbolic identity is produced and the ‘subject’ as that which evades this identity. So, how is this circular relationship to be understood?

As Adrian Johnston (2008b, 9) notes in his study of Žižek’s *Ontology* Lacan’s description of the ego as an ‘enveloping series of imaginary identifications’ evokes the popular metaphorical image of an onion. Like an onion, the ego is constituted in a series of succeeding layers. This image also allows a rudimentary depiction of the subject. If we peel off all the layers of the ego one by one, what we eventually get to when we reach the centre of the onion is not some hard kernel, rather we are left with nothing, or nothing but a void. At its most radical, the subject is this nothingness, this void or point of negativity. As Žižek (PV 150) puts it in *The Parallax View*: “The subject proper is empty, a kind of formal function, a void which remains after I sacrifice my ego (the wealth that constitutes my ‘person’).”

It is this negativity that prevents us from coinciding fully with the imaginary identification of the ego, from identifying wholly with the ‘ideological interpellations of the state apparatus’ to use Althusser’s vocabulary. In other words, the subject forecloses the possibility of any ultimate or complete subjectivation. This foreclosure is, as I have already mentioned, what Lacan has in mind when he says that the subject is ‘barred’ (\$). However, we must be cautious in our reading here. That the subject is barred should not be understood in the sense that the subject is somehow beyond the grasp of the procedures of identification, as something that these procedures fail to grasp. Rather, the subject emerges through this very failure of subjectivation (SOI 175; PV 244). Or, as Žižek explains: “[...] the intimate link between *subject* and *failure* lies not in the fact that ‘external material social rituals and/or practices forever fail to reach the subject’s innermost kernel, to represent it adequately [...] but, on the contrary, in the fact that the ‘subject’ itself is *nothing but* the failure of symbolization [...]”.<sup>248</sup> With the failure of subjectivation, the subject emerges as a negativity or void, which not only forecloses the totality of the process of subjectivation, but also fuels this process. As Žižek (TTS 159)

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<sup>248</sup> Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, please!,” 119-120.



notes: “[...] the subject’s endeavour to fill in the gap retroactively sustains and generates this gap.” So, to formulate it in a somewhat paradoxical way: what drives the process of subjectivation is the attempt to fill in the void, which emerges as the failure of this very process. The subject is thus at once its own impetus and obstacle, it is what both drives and hinders the process of subjectivation, both its condition of possibility and its condition of impossibility (TTS 161). This is what Žižek (TTS 159) refers to when he says that ‘subjectivity’ is the name of the ‘irreducible circularity’ between subject and subjectivation.<sup>249</sup>

*‘Not Only as Substance, but Also as Subject’*

On several occasions throughout his musings on the issue of subject, Žižek more than implies that what he understands as the notion of modern subjectivity (i.e. the Cartesian Cogito as revised by German Idealism and Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis) has its predecessor in Christianity, or to be precise, in Protestantism.<sup>250</sup> One such occasion is in his abovementioned introduction to the anthology *Cogito and the Unconscious* in which Žižek makes the following proposal:

[...] one can say that Martin Luther was the first great antihumanist: modern subjectivity is not announced in the Renaissance humanist celebration of man as the ‘crown of creation’, that is, in the tradition of Erasmus and others (to which Luther cannot but appear as a ‘barbarian’), but rather in Luther’s famous statement that man is the excrement who fell out of God’s anus. Modern subjectivity emerges when the subject perceives himself as ‘out of joint’, as excluded

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<sup>249</sup> It was, as Žižek (TTS 169) remarks in a note in *The Ticklish Subject*, probably Fichte who was the first to describe this paradoxical circularity of subjectivity: “Perhaps the first – and still unsurpassed – description of this paradox was provide by Fichte’s notion of Anstoss, the ‘obstacle/impetus’ that sets in motion the subject’s productive effort of ‘positing’ objective reality: this Anstoss is no longer the Kantian Thing-in-itself – an external stimulus affecting the subject from outside – but [...] a foreign body at the very heart of the subject. Subjectivity is thus defined not by a struggle against the inertia of the opposed substantial order, but by an absolute inherent tension.”

<sup>250</sup> The modern notion of the subject, in another more strictly etymological sense, also has its basis in Christian theology. Thus, in *God as Mystery of the World* Eberhard Jüngel (1983, 126) argues that due to the representation of the three divine hypostases (lat. *subjectum*) as persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in the doctrine of trinity “[...] there is implicitly operating a terminological change which will conceive *subjectum* as a Self, a ‘subject’ in the modern sense of the word.”

from the ‘order of the things’, from the positive order of entities. For that reason, the ontic equivalent of the modern subject is inherently excremental: there is no subjectivity proper without the notion that, at a different level, from another perspective, I am a piece of shit.<sup>251</sup>

At first sight this might look like just another of Žižek’s endless, colourful, and admittedly sometimes slightly superficial, illustrations. However, more recently, in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek has actually developed this suggestion in much greater detail through an extensive reading of Hegel’s theological writings, and in particular of his understanding of the incarnation and the theme of the death of God. Indeed, there is more to this slightly bizarre allusion to Luther than Žižek explicitly says in the particular context, because, as argued by Catherine Malabou (2005, 79f.), who like Žižek sees Hegel as the first to fully formulate the notion of modern subjectivity, Hegel’s notion of subjectivity has its main source of inspiration in Christian, indeed Protestant (even Lutheran), theology.<sup>252</sup> This is something that Žižek recognizes as well, and by doing so he seems tacitly to also acknowledge that in a certain sense the same goes for his own Hegelian notion of the subject.

In a crucial section entitled ‘The Double Kenosis’ of his first essay in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek (MC 58) implies how a fully developed notion of the modern subject was reached by Hegel as a response to the philosophical ‘problem of subjectivity gripped by absolute solitude and loneliness’ that grew out of the

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<sup>251</sup> Žižek, “Introduction: Cogito as a Shibboleth,” 4. Žižek (EYS 179; TTS 157; PV 187) proposed this claim as early as in his 1992 book *Enjoy your Symptom!*, that is, long before his so-called ‘Christian turn’, and he reaffirms it both in *The Ticklish Subject* and more recently in *The Parallax View*.

<sup>252</sup> See also Jüngel (1982, 63-100) on this issue of Hegel’s relationship to (Lutheran) theology. Due to his Hegelian reading of Christianity and his (MC 260) emphasis on the death of God as ‘the subversive core of Christianity’, Žižek is naturally closer to Protestant than to (most of) Catholic theology, which he also hints himself (MC 266, 293). As he puts in a recent essay: “The standard notion that Paul created Christianity as we know it is fully justified: it was Paul who shifted the center from Christ’s acts and teachings to the redemptive quality of his death.[...] In the history of Christianity, it was Protestantism which was ‘Pauline’, focusing on the death of God, in contrast to ‘Johannine’ Orthodoxy and ‘Petrine’ Catholicism. No wonder, then, that the most interesting moments in Catholic theology occur when it unexpectedly comes close to Protestantism.” Žižek, “From Job to Christ: A Pauline Reading of Chesterton,” 39.

radical critique of religion launched by the Enlightenment thinkers, but which they themselves were unable to resolve. In other words, the philosophical problem experienced as the unsurpassable distance between man and the Absolute, which in Hegel's (1977, 190) famous words already existed in its pre-philosophical form "[...] as the feeling that 'God Himself is dead', upon which the religion of more recent times rests [...]." The epitome of this problem is the claim of Kant's critical philosophy that we can always only know the divine Absolute as something unknowable, or that the transcendent God of traditional metaphysics is banished from the realm of reason. For Hegel, the passage through this 'nihilism of transcendental philosophy' is, as Žižek (MC 58) emphasizes, an absolute necessity. He is very well aware that we cannot go back and re-establish a positive relationship that bridges the distance between man and the Absolute. There is no return to the grand metaphysical systems of Spinoza and Leibniz. Instead, Hegel argues that the only way to link man and the Absolute is by transposing the distance between man and the Absolute into the Absolute itself, thus linking man and the Absolute through this common distance. Or in Žižek's (MC 58; PV 106) words: "The only solution is [...] the very redoubling of alienation, the insight into how my alienation from the Absolute overlaps with the Absolute's self-alienation: I am "in" God in my very distance from him." The proper dialectical trick is, as Žižek (PV 106) says elsewhere, the very feature that apparently separates me from God is in fact what unites me with God.

However, as Žižek (MC 58) immediately acknowledges, this raises another crucial problem: "how are we to think the link between these two 'alienations,' the one of the modern man from God (who is reduced to an unknowable In-Itself, absent from the world subjected to mechanical laws), the other of God from himself (in Christ, incarnation)?" Following Malabou's reading of Hegel, Žižek (MC 59) identifies the theological model of what Žižek refers to as 'double kenosis' upon which Hegel's solution to this problem is based:

In order for (human) subjectivity to emerge out of the substantial personality of the human animal, cutting links with it and positing itself as the I=I dispossessed of all substantial content, as the self-relating negativity of an empty singularity, *God himself*, the universal Substance, has [...] to appear as a singular miserable human individual in all its abjection, i.e., *abandoned by God*.

Hegel's theological solution to the philosophical problem of subjectivity is to 'sublate' the alienation (kenosis) of man from God by transposing this alienation (kenosis) into God himself. That is to say, we become ourselves only in the very alienation from ourselves. Or, as Žižek underlines with reference to Luther: "[...] there is no subjectivity without the reduction of the subject's positive substantial being to a disposable 'piece of shit'."<sup>253</sup> Such a 'reduction of the subject's positive substantial being' to a point of pure self-relating negativity requires, as Žižek argues, a 'double kenosis' (alienation), it requires that God is alienated not only from man, but also from God himself. To spell out the theological terms of this model, which makes up the precondition for Hegel's conception of modern subjectivity as radical alienation, as self-relating negativity, the death of Christ on the cross is thought of as the death of God himself, that is, as affecting not only Christ as a human being, but also the divine substance itself, not only his human, but also the divine nature.<sup>254</sup> Or as Žižek's (MC 59) puts it:

For subjectivity to emerge—not as a mere epiphenomenon of the global substantial ontological order, but as essential to Substance itself—the split, negativity, particularization, selfalienation, must be posited as something that takes place in the very heart of the divine Substance, i.e., the move from Substance to Subject must occur within God himself.

In other words, to become a subject in the Hegelian sense of the term, that is, as self-relating negativity, as the inherent 'minimal difference' of  $I = I$ , we must, in a dialectical move of 'negation of negation', transpose or 'sublate' the negativity of the subject into the Absolute itself. For the subject as self-relating negativity to emerge, negativity has to be posited in the order of Being/Substance itself. We must, to paraphrase Hegel's famous words from the preface of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 'conceive

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<sup>253</sup> Žižek, "Introduction: Cogito as a Shibboleth," 4.

<sup>254</sup> This radical meaning of the phrase 'God is dead' was, as argued by Eberhard Jüngel (1968, 104), only made possible by Luther's revision of the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*. On this matter see also Frederiek Depoortere's (2007a) article "'God Himself is Dead': Luther, Hegel, and the Death of God."

the absolute not only as substance, but also as subject.<sup>255</sup> Only by transposing man's self-alienation into Being itself, only by claiming that man's inherent gap equals an inherent gap in Being itself, does this alienation, this gap, become his essence rather than something that he has to overcome. Thus, the Hegelian logic that provides the solution to the problem of modern subjectivity is, according to Žižek (MC 71-72), not to heal the wound (subject) of alienation/negation by directly healing it, but rather to fully identify with this wound by getting rid of the presupposed intact/whole body (substance) into which the wound is a cut by repeating the alienation/negation. In *On Belief*, Žižek (OB 104) also describes this logic as the basic insight of Christianity: "The basic Christian insight is [...] [that] getting rid of the wound, healing it, is ultimately the same as fully and directly identifying with it – this is the ambiguity inscribed into the figure of Christ."

In sum, Žižek implicitly acknowledges, what is more explicitly argued by Malabou, namely that it is through this dialectical negation of negation, based on the theological model of Christ's death as the death of God himself, the 'double kenosis' of divine subjectivity, that Hegel, *the* Christian philosopher according to Žižek (MC 291, cf. 267), arrives at the logic that characterises the fully modern notion of subjectivity. As he (PD 88) says in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*: "Both Christianity and Hegel transpose the gap which separates us from the Absolute into the Absolute itself."

### *Why Humanism Is Not Enough*

It is also against the background of his Christian-Hegelian understanding of the death of God as 'double kenosis' we should understand Žižek's (MC 57, 75; cf. TN 29-30; SOI 225-227) rejection of the kind of humanist atheism based on the Feuerbachian-Marxist critique of religion according to which God is nothing but an ideological projection, the alienating production of our own collective imagination.<sup>256</sup> What is wrong, according to Žižek, with this claim is not that it is too radical, but on the contrary, that it is not radical enough. Against this

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<sup>255</sup> Or as Žižek (OWB 45) puts it: "This is what Hegel's motto 'one should conceive the Absolute not only as Substance, but also as Subject' means: 'subject' is the name for a crack in the edifice of Being."

<sup>256</sup> See also Žižek, "Humanism is not enough – An interview with Slavoj Žižek."

humanist, Feuerbachian-Marxist version of atheism, Žižek (MC 75) calls for a ‘properly Christian gesture’. That is, a Christian-Hegelian reading of the death of God, in which not only man, but God himself stops believing in God. Or, as he (PD 15, cf. MC 48, 237) puts it in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*: “In the standard form of atheism, God dies for men who stop believing in Him; in Christianity God dies *for Himself*.” This ‘Christian-Hegelian atheist’ insistence on that ‘God dies for himself’, or in term of kenosis, that alienation is not just a process in us, humans, but something which takes place in the divine substance itself, offers a genuine materialist lesson that the standard humanist Feuerbachian-Marxist atheism misses. That is to say, the materialist lesson – manifested in Christ’s cry of dereliction on the cross ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me’ (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46) – that there is no big Other, that Being itself is incomplete. It is precisely against this setting that we should comprehend Žižek’s (PD 6) paradoxical claim in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* that “[...] to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.” Moreover, as implied in the preceding, the Feuerbachian-Marxist critique of religion also has a lesson to learn from Christianity in terms of atheism.<sup>257</sup>

In relation to subjectivity, the consequence of this materialist insight, which the Feuerbachian-Marxist critique of religion misses according to Žižek (MC 59), is that man’s alienation is not a ‘distortion’ of the true human substance so that all we have to do is to re-appropriate the alienated substance; rather this alienated substance is the very basis of human subjectivity, or in other words, this alienation is not something to be overcome, on the contrary it is, according to Žižek (SOI 5), what defines *la condition humaine* as such.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Echoing the above-quoted claim, Žižek has thus recently, in a lecture given at the annual meeting of the *American Academy of Religion* in 2009, furthermore proposed that: “Not only is atheism the truth of Christianity but one can only be a true atheist by passing through the Christian experience. All other atheisms continue to rely on some form of the big Other.” See Žižek, “Whither the ‘Death of God’: A Continuing Currency?”

<sup>258</sup> Žižek’s critique can be summarized in the words of Arne Grøn (2008, 8-9; cf. 2009) who have proposed a similar critique of the Feuerbachian critique of religion: “Critiques of religion that reduce religion to human interpretations as projections [...] tend to create a new illusion: the idea that, once we have got rid of religion, we are free to unfold our true

As Žižek (MC 32) himself is well aware, the result of his Hegelian reading of the death of God as equal to the death of not only the Son but also the Father, is the abolishment of the kind of absolute transcendence that has traditionally been ascribed to the Judeo-Christian God. Considering the considerable critique that has been raised in the course of time by theology against Hegel on this issue, it cannot come as a surprise that a similar type of critique has been levelled against Žižek from the theological camp.<sup>259</sup> For instance in a recently published excellent essay by the Catholic theologian Frederiek Depoortere (2007, 498) in which he explicitly “[...] aims at evaluating Žižek’s claim that the Incarnation should be understood as the end of God’s transcendence.”<sup>260</sup> Depoortere’s (2007b, 519-520) conclusion is that Žižek is indeed guilty of ‘a complete abandonment of superior transcendence’. Depoortere moreover suggests that the consequence of this might be that Žižek, instead of combating capitalism, due to this abandonment of superior transcendence, ends up doing the precise opposite. To my knowledge, Žižek has not countered any such charges against himself or against Hegel directly. However, he has discussed extensively in more general terms the question of the relationship between immanence and transcendence in Hegel’s philosophy. So, let us take a brief look at how Žižek conceives this relationship.

In Žižek’s reading, Hegel does not simply eradicate God’s transcendence. That is, Hegel does not merely abolish the gap between man and God; rather, he displaces this gap into God himself. To put it in other words, in Žižek’s reading, Hegel does not simply break with the idea that reality is grounded in some transcendent Entity outside itself, or in Lacanese, with the (masculine) logic of the constitutive exception; rather he

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humanity. The inhumanity of humans then is ‘parked’ as it were in religion.”

<sup>259</sup> The objection that Hegel abolishes any real transcendence has recently been advanced for example by William Desmond (2003, 206) in his book *Hegel’s God: a counterfeit double?* where he argues that rather than overcoming the division between reason and faith, man and God, brought about by the Enlightenment thinker’s critique of religion, Hegel’s abolishment of transcendence radicalizes this division. See also Malabou (2005, 91-102) for an exposition of (some of) the theological objections against Hegel including his (alleged) termination of God’s transcendence.

<sup>260</sup> Let me just note in passing that in his contribution to *The Monstrosity of Christ*, John Milbank (2009, 112, 117) also voices this charge of the annulment of God’s transcendence, but without elaborating it any further.

introduces the (feminine) logic of not-All, the idea that reality itself is not a consistent Whole. This displacement effects the conception of the relationship between transcendence and immanence. One way to describes this, would be to say, as Adrian Johnston (2008b, 143) does, that Hegel reverses the relationship between transcendence and immanence from an idealist prioritization of transcendence over immanence to a materialist prioritization of immanence over transcendence. In *Organ without Bodies*, Žižek (OWB 61) explains the crucial point of this ‘reversal’ in the following way: “Therein lies Hegel’s true lesson: immanence generates the spectre of transcendence because it is already inconsistent itself.” And a few pages further into the book he (OWB 65) elaborates: “The tension between immanence and transcendence is [...] secondary with regard to the gap within immanence itself: ‘transcendence’ is a kind of perspective illusion, the way we (mis)perceive the gap/discord that inheres to immanence itself.” So, how more precisely, should we conceive of such a ‘gap in immanence’?<sup>261</sup>

The best way to clarify the kind of inherent gap or immanent transcendence that Žižek has in mind here is perhaps via a well-known Lacanian illustration from the field of topology, namely the Möbius strip. Indeed, in *For They Do Not Know*, Žižek (FTKN 218-219) explicitly suggests that the difference between a Kantian external gap and a Hegelian inherent gap may be illustrated topologically through the distinction between a broken circle (Kant) and the Möbius strip (Hegel). In his *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Dylan Evan (2010, 116) gives the following very helpful definition of the Möbius strip:

The moebius strip is [...] a figure which subverts our normal (Euclidean) way of representing space, for it seems to have two sides, but in fact has only one (and only one edge). Locally, at any point, two sides can be clearly distinguished, but when the whole strip is traversed it becomes clear that they are in fact continuous. The two sides are only distinguished by the dimension of time, the time it takes to traverse the whole strip.

Thus, the immanent transcendence exemplified by the topology of the Möbius strip basically consists, as noted by Alenka Zupančič (2008b, 54), in the paradox that while there is only one

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<sup>261</sup> I have already touched upon this issue of immanent transcendence in a preliminary manner in my discussion of Žižek’s conception of the incarnation at the very end of the last chapter.



surface, and as such nothing but pure immanence, there is nevertheless at every point of this pure immanence (of the strip) also another side and thus continuously a kind of transcendence.<sup>262</sup> In a comment on Hegel's idealism tucked away in a footnote in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, Žižek (MC 107) describes this paradoxical notion of immanent transcendence in a way that cannot but recall Evan's above depiction of the Möbius strip. Referring to Hegel's specific version of idealism, Žižek explains that:

[...] its core resides in the assertion that finite (determinate, positive-substantial) reality is in itself void, inconsistent, self-sublating. From this, however, it does not follow that this reality is just a shadow, a secondary reflection, etc., of some higher reality: there is *nothing but* this reality, and the "suprasensible is appearance qua appearance," i.e., the very movement of the self-sublation of this reality. [...] This is why Hegel cannot be situated with regard to the opposition between transcendence and immanence: his position is that of the *absolute immanence of transcendence*. In other words, his position can be grasped only in a temporal shift: first, one asserts transcendence (in an apophatic way)—immanent/immediate positive reality is not all, it has to be negated/overcome, it points beyond itself; then, this overcoming is posited as thoroughly immanent: what is beyond immediate reality is not another higher reality, but the movement of its negation as such.

Thus, with this Hegelian conception of 'absolute immanence of transcendence', which, due to its 'Möbius-strip-character', exceeds our Euclidean representation of space, Žižek is not merely guilty of abandoning a 'superior transcendence' over an 'interior transcendence', as Depoortere suggests; rather, he is guilty of the far more severe crime of deconstructing the very opposition between immanence and transcendence.

### *The Maladaptive Animal*

In the introduction of this chapter I indicated that I think that Žižek's reading of the Freudian notion of 'death drive' is of immense importance to the discussion in this chapter, not only because it is closely related to the significant theological themes

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<sup>262</sup> In contrast to Zupančič, who opposes this notion of inherent transcendence to theological transcendence, Žižek (OB 90) clearly relates it to theology insofar that he, as we have also seen in the previous chapter in terms of the notion of 'minimal difference', conceives Christ exactly as an embodiment of this kind of transcendence.

of subjectivity, freedom and immortality in focus here, but also because Žižek (OB 90; PV 123) explicitly relates it to a ‘divine’ or ‘theological’ dimension in man. Thus, the main questions I will try to answer in this sector are the following: How are we to understand Žižek’s (CWZ 61) comparison of subjectivity as self-relating negativity, with death drive? In what way does death drive, as Žižek (PV 202, 210, 231) argues, make up the condition of possibility for freedom, and how does he define freedom? In what sense are we to understand Žižek’s (PF 113; TTS 294; PV 62) claim that death drive is what makes man immortal? And lastly, wherein lies the ‘theological’ dimension in all this? I will furthermore attempt to sketch out Žižek’s (TTS 160-161) objection against Badiou that the latter needs death drive as a ‘vanishing mediator’ between being and event to explain properly how it is possible that the human animal can become an immortal subject of truth. However, to clarify these matters it is necessary to provide conceptual framework in terms of a more general introduction of Žižek’s conception of ‘death drive’, including its relation to the notions of ‘instinct’ and ‘desire’.<sup>263</sup>

In *For They Do Not Know What They Do* and later again in *The Ticklish Subject* Žižek brings up the old politico-philosophical issue of the (pre-historic) origin of the reign of law. That is: How did man go from being a mere animal to a being of language bound by the symbolic order? How was the passage from a natural into a civil or cultural state brought about? The answer given by classical Political Philosophy is of course the famous narrative of the ‘social contract’. But in Žižek’s (FTKN 205) view this is an inconsistent explanation insofar that “[...] the fiction of a ‘social contract’ *presupposes in advance* what is or should be its result, its final outcome – the presence of individuals who act according to rules of a civilized rational order [...].” According to Žižek (TTS 36; FTKN 206), the passage from a natural to a cultural state cannot be accounted for in terms of a smooth continuous transition, something has to intervene between these two states. What the evolutionary narratives of social contract silently presuppose is, according to Žižek (TTS 36), a kind of ‘vanishing mediator’ which is neither nature nor culture. So, what is this vanishing mediator?

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<sup>263</sup> Let me as a preliminary clarification emphasize that in the Lacanian interpretation of the notion that Žižek subscribes to the ‘death drive’ is not a separate drive but, rather an aspect of every drive (Evans 2010, 33).

Although dismissive of evolutionary narratives, being a good materialist, Žižek (TTS 36) must of course also reject any (idealist) account that would want to explain this mediating intervention with reference to some sort of external, transcendent cause. Man did not become what he is through a “[...] spark of *logos* magically conferred on *Homo sapiens* [...]” Instead, Žižek’s (CWZ 80) claim is that the transition from nature to culture is enabled by a ‘malfunction’, a failure, in nature itself. As he (CWZ 65) puts it in one of his conversations with Glyn Daly: “We cannot pass directly from nature to culture. Something goes terribly wrong in nature: nature produces an unnatural monstrosity and I claim that it is in order to cope with, to domesticate, this monstrosity that we symbolize.” As the last part of the quote suggests, and as Žižek (TTS 37) explicitly underlines in his discussion in *The Ticklish Subject*, the symbolic order of law (culture) is thus not, as it is usually asserted, aimed at controlling our natural instincts and inclination (nature) but, rather directed against something in us which is *not* natural, namely this moment of thoroughly derailed, malfunctioning, denaturalized ‘nature’. Indeed in the effort to domesticate this malfunctioning (de)nature “[...] man’s natural propensities are, rather, on the side of moral law against the excess of ‘unruliness’ that threatens his well-being” (TTS 37). As Žižek (TTS 289) emphasizes later in the same book, one should never forget that the law is ultimately in the service of the ‘pleasure principle’ which dictates our daily functioning in accordance with the upholding of our welfare;<sup>264</sup> that is to say, the law is not opposed to our natural instincts as it is claimed in the standard story of ‘nature versus culture’, rather the law and the natural instincts are united in their attempt to constrain the derailed (de)nature of man endangering his self-preservation. This mediating moment of malfunction, this intersection between nature and culture, which made possible the transition between these two states, only to ‘vanish’ under the domesticating reign of symbolic law

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<sup>264</sup> Freud formulated his thesis on the death drive precisely in response to phenomena which could not be explained on the basis of the ‘pleasure principle’, phenomena that were ‘beyond the pleasure principle’, and its directive of self-preservation. In Žižek’s (CWZ 61) words: “In trying to explain the functioning of the human psyche in terms of the pleasure principle, reality principle and so on, Freud became increasingly aware of a radical non-functional element, a basic destructiveness and excess of negativity, that couldn’t be accounted for. And that is why Freud posed the hypothesis of death drive.”

and the ‘pleasure principle’, is, according to Žižek (TTS 36; FTKN 207; CWZ 65), nothing less than the emergence of the (death) drive.<sup>265</sup>

In the English translation and reception of Freud’s work, most notably in the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud*, there has been an unfortunate tendency to translate both ‘drive’ (*Trieb*) and ‘instinct’ (*Instinkt*) as instinct (Evans 2010, 46). However, as Žižek (like many others before him) repeatedly insists, we must not ignore this important distinction made by Freud.<sup>266</sup> ‘Instincts’ have to do with biological needs such as the need to eat or the need to propagate. Another key feature is that instincts

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<sup>265</sup> In his discussion of contemporary neurosciences in *The Parallax View*, Žižek (PV 174-250) advances a similar argument against what he sees as their inconsistent accounts of the emergence of consciousness. Although he agrees with the neurosciences that consciousness (the mental) emerges from the brain (the neuronal), Žižek argues that it is not possible to pass directly from brain to consciousness, there must be a mediating intervention. As he (PV 177) declares toward the end of the third chapter of the book: “The wager of Chapter 4 of this book, the hypothesis it endeavours to substantiate, is that this missing concept—a kind of absent Cause of cognitivist accounts—is none other than what German Idealism called selfrelating negativity and Freud called ‘the death drive’.” Moreover, as Žižek also importantly explains in his discussion of the neurosciences, the possibility condition for the death drive to emerge is the not-All character of reality itself. It is the incompleteness of being/nature that makes possible its own derailing/malfunctioning. As Adrian Johnston (2007d, 8) puts it in his review of the book: “Relatively early in *The Parallax View*, Žižek appeals [...] to a notion of being as shot through with holes and void; [...] This perforation of being provides the minimal opening needed for the introduction of the psychoanalytic motif of conflict into ontology itself [...]” So, in other words, the precondition for Žižek’s theory of the subject presented in this chapter is the kind of dialectical materialism presented in the prior chapter.

<sup>266</sup> Another serious mistake in the reception of the notion of death drive is, according to Žižek, to read it in terms of Freud’s own dualistic framework of Thanatos and Eros as part of a conflict between two different forces. As he stresses in his discussion of Catherine Malabou’s book *Les nouveaux blessés* on Freud and neuroscience: “When Malabou varies the motif that, for Freud, Eros always relates to and encompasses its opposite Other, the destructive death drive, she [...] conceives this opposition as the conflict of two opposed forces, not, in a more proper sense, as the inherent self-blockade of the drive: ‘death drive’ is not an opposite force with regard to libido, but a constitutive gap which makes drive distinct from instinct [...]” Žižek, “Descartes and the Post-traumatic Subject,” 22. See also Evans (2010, 48). For a reading in line with the one suggested by Žižek see Gilles Deleuze (2004, 18-19) *Difference and Repetition*.

are relatively fixed and directly related to their objects (Evans 2010, 85). Furthermore, and most importantly, an instinct can be satisfied, for instance by eating or copulating, thus once a need is fulfilled the instinct finds peace (OB 94). In contrast to biological instincts, ‘drives’ are not directly bound to a specific object. As Dylan Evans (2010, 46, cf. OB 93-94) puts it: “The drives differ from biological needs in that they can never be satisfied, and do not aim at an object but rather circle perpetually around it.”<sup>267</sup> Thus, while instincts pursue the object of need directly, the drive circulates repeatedly around its object. This fundamental and very important difference between instincts and drives can also be illustrated in a helpful way through the following anecdote presented by Žižek in *On Belief*, concerning a laboratory experiment on rats described by Jacques-Alain Miller in one of the latter’s seminars.

In the first part of the experiment it is, as Žižek (OB 103) explains, observed how a rat reacts if it is moved from a labyrinthine arrangement in which it has free access to a desired object (e.g. a piece of good food), into another arrangement in which the rat can see and thereby knows where the desired object is, but cannot gain access to it. As an alternative, a series of similar objects of inferior value are made easily accessible. How does the rat react? At first it tries to get to the ‘original’ object, but soon it renounces it and instead turns to some of the substitute objects. So, in short, the rat “[...] will act as a ‘rational’ subject of utilitarianism” as Žižek (OB 103) puts it. In the second part of the experiment the rat is let loose in the same labyrinthine arrangement in which the ‘original’ object is inaccessible, but only after the scientists have performed a surgical operation on the rat, ‘messing about with its brain in ways about which it is better to know nothing’ (OB 103). So, what happens?

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<sup>267</sup> Although Žižek (CWZ 61) relates the death drive to nature in the sense that it has emerged out of nature, but precisely as something which can nevertheless not be reduced to nature (‘an unnatural monstrosity produced by nature’); thus, in his Lacanian reading “[...] the Freudian death drive it is not a biological category but has a philosophical dignity.” This reading differs from Freud’s own reading in which the death drive was in fact perceived as a biological force. But, according to Žižek (SOI 4): “[...] we have to abstract Freud’s biologism: ‘death drive’ is not a biological fact, but a notion indicating that the human psychic apparatus is subordinated to a blind automatism of repetition beyond the pleasure-seeking, self-preservation, accordance between man and his milieu.”

*The rat insisted:* it never became fully reconciled with the loss of the 'true' object and resigned itself to one of the inferior substitutes, but repeatedly returned to the 'true' object and attempted to reach it. In short, the rat in a sense was *humanized*, it assumed the tragic 'human' relationship towards the unattainable absolute object which, on account of its very inaccessibility, forever captivates our desire (OB 103).

In other words, before the rat was 'humanized' it was perfectly able to adapt to its environment, to act like a 'rational subject of utilitarianism' and replace the inaccessible 'original' object with an accessible substitute. But after the rat's nature was derailed, after 'something had gone terribly wrong' (to put it euphemistically) in its brain, it became a 'maladaptive' animal; it began to display a 'stubborn attachment' to the impossible object. The inaccessible object becomes an 'obsession', something to which the rat is excessively attached, something to which it returns again and again seeking to obtain it. According to Žižek (OB 94), it is exactly this 'closed loop' of perpetual repetition of the same failed gesture which characterises the drive. It is this gesture of 'stubborn attachment' that makes man the maladaptive animal; or, as Žižek (PV 231) underscores in *The Parallax View*:

[...] we should bear in mind the basic anti-Darwinian lesson of psychoanalysis repeatedly emphasized by Lacan: man's radical and fundamental dis-adaptation, *mal*-adaptation, to his environs. At its most radical, 'being-human' consists in an 'uncoupling' from immersion in one's environs, in following a certain automatism which ignores the demands of adaptation—this is what the 'death drive' ultimately amounts to. [...] 'death drive' as a self-sabotaging structure represents the minimum of freedom, of a behavior uncoupled from the utilitarian-survivalist attitude.

Although man is thus in a certain sense determined by a malfunction, a failure to adapt to his surroundings, it is, as implied in the last part of the quote, also (though it might seem counter-intuitive) this very mal-adaptive automatism of the death drive that due to its 'uncoupling' from the normal run of things, grounds a break with determinism and thus enables a genuine act of freedom (I will elaborate in a moment on what such an act of freedom consists in when I turn to the difference between drive and desire). It would therefore clearly be a mistake to assume, on account of this aspect of automatism characterizing the death

drive, that Žižek with this notion reintroduces some sort of quasi-instinctual energy opposing the natural instincts in service of the pleasure principle (as Freud did). Rather, the maladaptive automatism of the death drive is the emergence of the unnatural ‘in-between’ dimension of man per excellence, namely his subjectivity. Or, in Žižek’s (TT 52) words: “[...] the death drive is not the pre-subjective noumenal Real itself, but the impossible moment of the ‘birth of subjectivity’, of the negative gesture of contraction/withdrawal that replaces reality with *membra disjecta* [...]” However, this notion of man as a malfunctioning, mal-adaptive, animal brings us not only to the issue of subjectivity as such, but also to the question of how we should understand Žižek’s (CWZ 61, 65) equation of the German idealist notion of subjectivity as self-relating negativity and the Freudian notion of death drive.<sup>268</sup> According to Žižek, it is namely this element of rupture of the human-being with its milieu, even with its own nature, related to a malfunction or a fundamental failure, that unites these two notions of the subject. This, somewhat counter-intuitive, equation of the subject with death drive is perhaps more patent in the (many) cases when Žižek (e.g. PV 102; TTS 61) in his description of the German idealist notion of subjectivity, turns to the Hegelian metaphors of ‘monstrosity’ and the ‘night of the world’ as a moment, a ‘vanishing mediator’, of ‘mad’ self-withdrawal that constitutes the subject as such. Still, Žižek (CWZ 64-65) also makes this link in a more explicit manner, for example in one of his conversations with Glyn Daly:

What psychoanalysis enables us to grasp is that death drive is a kind of inherent condition of the symbolic order. To put it in slightly simplistic terms: at its most elementary, symbolization exists as a kind of secondary stop-gap measure in the sense that it consists of an attempt to patch things up when something goes terrible wrong. And what interests me is this dimension at which something goes terrible wrong. [...] To put it in a different way, what interests me so much already in German Idealism is the idea that with negativity (death drive) there is neither nature nor culture, but something in between.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> See also Žižek, “Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek” and Žižek, “Humanism is Not Enough - An Interview with Slavoj Žižek”.

<sup>269</sup> A similar point is made in a more implicit manner by Žižek (PV 210f.) in his discussion of the Portuguese neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s conception of the self in *The Parallax View*. In a critical remark on Damasio, Žižek (PV 227) notes that the latter “[...] leaves out of

Thus, paradoxically, in Žižek's view the automatism of the drive death does not designate an additional kind of natural function determining the cause of man, rather it designates a dimension of autonomy in man that since Descartes has been associated with the term 'subject'.

*The Immortal Insistence of Death Drive*

Žižek ends his anecdote about the rat-experiment by emphasizing another paradoxical key feature of the death drive at which I have already hinted in the above, namely its excessive and also potentially self-harming character. What the death drive designates is, in Žižek's (OB 104) words, the fact that "[...] humans are not simply alive, but possessed by a strange drive to enjoy life in excess of the ordinary run of things – and 'death' stands simply and precisely for the dimension beyond 'ordinary' biological life." It is this thrust to go (on) beyond biological life (and death) that Žižek (PV 62) identifies with human immortality: "The paradox of the Freudian 'death drive' is therefore that it is Freud's name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life, for an 'undead' urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption."<sup>270</sup> Thus, in the most basic sense, what the strange assertion of immortality of man frequently advanced by Žižek in his more recent work refers to is this unnatural urge to *live* life in an excessive way beyond biological self-preservation, 'beyond the pleasure principle', towards something which cannot be reduced to mere biological life.<sup>271</sup> Although, the 'death' in death

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consideration the proper empty core of subjectivity (\$) which, insofar as it explodes the frame of life-regulating homeostasis, coincides with what Freud called the death drive. The chain equivalence thus imposes itself between the 'empty' *cogito* (the Cartesian subject, Kant's transcendental subject), the Hegelian topic of self-relating negativity, and the Freudian topic of the death drive."

<sup>270</sup> This is also why Žižek (TTS 166; PV 110; IDLC 395) repeatedly underscores that the Freudian notion of death drive, in contrast to Badiou's (LW 509) reading of it, has nothing to do with the notion of finitude as referring to man as 'only mortal'.

<sup>271</sup> In *The Plague of Fantasies* Žižek (PF 113) moreover relates the immortality of death drive to the Freudian unconscious: "[...] as Freud emphasizes repeatedly, *there is no notion or representation of death in the unconscious*: the Freudian *Todestrieb* has absolutely nothing to do with the Heideggerian *Sein-zum-Tode*. Drive is immortal, eternal, 'undead': the



drive does thus designate neither a ‘nihilistic’ craving for self-annihilation (PV 62) nor the mere fact of man’s mortality/finitude (PV 110), it can, as Alenka Zupančič (2000, 250) notes, nevertheless “[...] be ‘mortal’ precisely *because it is indifferent to death* (as well as to life), because it is not preoccupied with death, because death does not interest it.” Moreover, Žižek’s use of the term ‘immortality’, also seems to refer to the fact that there is a certain timeless aspect about the death drive. ‘Stubbornly attached’ to and ‘endlessly circulating’ around its object, the death drive is in a certain sense beyond time; in its endless repetitive circular movement, it is in a way indifferent to the passage of time. As, Žižek stresses in *The Parallax View*: “This rotary movement, in which the linear progress of time is suspended in a repetitive loop, is *drive* at its most elementary. This, again, is ‘humanization’ at its zero-level: this self-propelling loop which suspends/disrupts linear temporal enchainment.”

Žižek does not explicitly discuss his understanding of immortality in relation to religion, but since the immortality of death drive is, as Žižek (PV 62) emphasizes, beyond *both* life and death, it is apparently not compatible with the religious notion of immortality as a sort of continued life in the afterlife, at least not in its traditional conception. It is, however, worth noting in passing that in *The Ticklish Subject* Žižek does actually bring up immortality in relation to a key figure of modern Christian theology, namely Kierkegaard. Here Žižek (TTS 293-294; cf. PF 112-113) suggests the following parallel between the notion of ‘death drive’ and Kierkegaard’s notion of ‘sickness unto death’ concerning precisely the issue of immortality: “[...] like the Kierkegaardian sickness unto death, the death drive is not a mark of finitude, but its very opposite, the name for ‘eternal (spectral) life’, the index of a dimension of human existence that persists forever, beyond our physical death, and of which we can never rid ourselves.” However, this ‘horrifying’ persistency beyond life and death is not the only aspect of immortality that unites Kierkegaard’s sickness unto death and the Freudian death drive. According to Žižek (TTS 293),

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annihilation towards which the death drive tends is not the unsurpassable limit of man *qua* finite being. Unconsciously, we all believe we are immortal – there is no death-anxiety [*Todesangst*] in our unconscious, which is why the very phenomenon of ‘consciousness’ is grounded in our awareness of our mortality.”

Kierkegaard's sickness unto death designates a form of despair which must be distinguished from the standard despair of the individual who is split between the certainty that death is the end, and his desire to believe that death is not the end. In contrast, the despair of sickness unto death involves the reverse paradox of an individual who knows that death is not the end, that he has an immortal soul, but who desperately wants to believe that death *is* the end, because he, as Žižek (TTS 293) puts it, [...] cannot face the exorbitant demands of this fact (the necessity to abandon vain aesthetics pleasures and work for his salvation) [...].” In other words, the immortality characterizing both the Kierkegaardian sickness unto death and the Freudian death drive involves an ethical aspect, an (unbearable) ethical demand. This common ethical aspect is further illuminated in the following comment by Žižek (WTDR 69-70) on the relationship between Kierkegaard and Badiou:

And is this not the same dilemma as that of Kierkegaard's 'sickness unto death'? We are not afraid to discover that we are mortal, but, rather, that we are *immortal*. Here, one should link Kierkegaard with Badiou: It is difficult, properly traumatic, for a human animal to accept that his life is not just a stupid process of reproduction and attaining pleasures, but that it is in the service of a Truth.

It is well-known that Kierkegaard explicitly relates the despair of sickness unto death with the theological notion of 'sin'. Although Žižek does not make such a connection, he does however, as we shall see in a moment, briefly imply a parallel between death drive and the theological notion of 'sin'. But, first we need to return to our more general exposition of the death drive and the important distinction made by Žižek between drive and desire.

In his discussion in *The Ticklish Subject* of the transition from nature to culture, Žižek (TTS 37) underlines, as I have already mentioned, that the role of the law (culture) is, in service of the 'pleasure principle', to pacify, not man's natural instincts, but “[...] his excessive love for freedom, his natural ‘unruliness’, which goes far beyond obeying animal instinct [...]”, or in short, the death drive. The law does this by prohibiting the object to which the drive is excessively attached, which forces open the closed loop of the drive, replacing the continuous circulation around one object with a successive movement from one substitute object to another. Another way to put it is that the

law's prohibition of the object introduces a lack which constitutes what Lacan terms the 'metonymy of desire'; that is, the infinite sliding from one substitute object to another, driven by the loss of the original object, which is in fact nothing but is own lack. Desire, as the endless transgressing thrust toward the 'Thing' (Lacan's term for the lost/forbidden object of desire), is therefore not prior to the law, but, as Paul already knew, instituted by the law itself (HTRL 42; Evans 2010, 99). The law is thus not aimed at regulating man's desire, rather desire is a product of the law's attempt to regulate the drives and thus in a certain sense part of this regulation. The metonymy of desire is furthermore sustained by the fantasy fostered by the law that the Thing is not really impossible (nothing but lack), but merely forbidden, and that it therefore at some point will be possible to obtain it; or in short, the fantasy that desire might actually be satisfied. But, as Žižek (AF 80) underlines: "Desire is [...] always and by definition unsatisfied, metonymical, shifting from one object to another, since I do not actually desire what I want. What I actually desire is to sustain desire itself, to postpone the dreaded moment of its satisfaction."

Thus, on the one hand, the culture state of desire returns man to something that resemblances his 'natural' state insofar that the dialectic of law-desire turns him away from his excessive 'struckness' in the endlessly repeated circular movement of the drive, towards the more 'rational choice' of a substitute object. On the other hand, the 'second nature' of desire is not exactly 'natural' in the sense of a biological instinct. Rather, desire can never be satisfied by its substitute object, it always replaces it with another object and so on. And in contrast to the biological instincts, but like the drives, desire is strictly speaking not related to an object ('I do not desire what I want') but, rather to the lack of an object. Or in other words, like in the case of the drive, desire is related to a gap. It is however, as Žižek (OB 92-98; PV 60-63) emphasizes, paramount to distinguish between the gap of the drive and the gap of desire, if we want to avoid a highly misleading confusion between drive and desire. The gap that characterizes desire is, as I have already hinted, the external gap between the substitutable object (that I want) and the forbidden/lost Thing (that I desire). In contrast, the gap that characterises the drive is, according to Žižek (OB 92; PV 61), the inherent gap between its 'goal' and its 'aim'. That is, the gap between the object around which the drive circulates endlessly

(goal) and this very endless circulation around the object itself (aim). This finally brings us back to the issue of theology.

In *On Belief*, Žižek explicitly relates this discussion of the difference between desire and drive to Christianity. In the section entitled ‘God Resides in Detail’, Žižek applies the contrast between Judaism and Christianity to illustrate this difference (and vice-versa). Following Hegel, Žižek (OB 89; cf. SOI 201-207; FTKN xxx-xxxi) suggests that Judaism is the religion of the Sublime, insofar that it perceives God as the transcendent irreprehensible wholly Other, or in Lacanian terms, as the impossible God-Thing.<sup>272</sup> In other words, Judaism follows the logic of desire. In contrast, Christianity renounces this transcendent God-Thing of the Beyond with its fundamental message that Christ (this miserable human-being) *is* God (the Sublime).<sup>273</sup> By claiming the absolute identity between God and man, Christianity acknowledges that there is really nothing (no Thing) beyond appearance, or more correctly, as Žižek (OB 89) puts it “[...] Nothing BUT the imperceptible X that changes Christ, this ordinary man, into God.” That is to say, although Christianity ‘inverses the Jewish sublimation into a radical desublimation’, this inversion is not merely a (Feuerbachian) reduction of God to man, but rather the manifestation of the divine dimension in man (OB 90). So, in what does this X, this divine dimension in man, consist? Žižek’s (OB 90) answer is that:

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<sup>272</sup> According to Lacan’s (1992, 112) definition in seminar VII what characterizes sublimation is precisely that “[...] it raises an object [...] to the dignity of the Thing.” Besides designating the lost object of desire, Lacan’s notion of the Thing also conveys the notion of a ‘real’ beyond symbolization and representation, an unknowable X outside the grip of language, which has clear affinities with the Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’ (Evans 2010, 205).

<sup>273</sup> It is worth noting that Žižek (OB 92) in the same context proposes that: “[...] tragedy and comedy are also to be opposed along the axis of the opposition between desire and drive. As Lacan emphasized throughout his teaching, not only is desire inherently ‘tragic’ (condemned to its ultimate failure), tragedy itself [...] is ultimately always the tragedy of desire. Drive, on the contrary, is inherently COMIC in its ‘closing the loop’ and suspending the gap of desire, in its assertion of the coincidence, identity even, between the sublime and the everyday object.” Though he does not say it explicitly, this proposition clearly suggests that Žižek understands Christianity, which he (PV 105-107) as we know associates with comics, as the religion of drive.

[...] far from being the Highest in man, the purely spiritual dimension towards which all humans strive, the ‘divinity’ is rather a kind of obstacle, of a ‘bone in the throat’ – it is something, that unfathomable X, on account of which man cannot ever fully become MAN, self-identical. The point is not that, due to the limitation of his mortal sinful nature, man cannot ever become fully divine, but that, *due to the divine spark in him, man cannot ever fully become MAN.*

As we know by now this ‘imperceptible X’ (the inherent ‘minimal difference’) that Christ manifests, which according to Žižek is what prevents man from becoming fully man, is of course that which also goes under the name of the subject, the Cartesian Cogito, the self-relating negativity of German idealism, the Lacanian \$ or the Freudian death drive.<sup>274</sup> In Žižek’s words, Christ “[...] stands for the excess of life, for the ‘undead’ surplus which persists over the cycle of generation and corruption [...]” In terms of the issue of the difference between desire and drive, we could say that the Christian transposition in the figure of Christ of the gap between man and God into God himself, conforms to the transposition of the external gap between the substitutable object (that I want) and the forbidden/lost Thing (that I desire) into an inherent gap in the object itself around which the drive circulates.<sup>275</sup> Thus, the Christian ‘inversion of Jewish sublimation into a radical desublimation’ is not merely the demythologization of desire; it is the manifestation of the dimension of drive in man. Or, to put it in other words: by manifesting the divine dimension in man through its message of Christ on the cross as the death the God, Christianity makes it possible to (re)enter the domain of drives. By making manifest through his sacrifice on the Cross of the absolute identity between the sublime Thing and miserable human-being (the everyday object) Christ suspends the gap of desire and (re)closes the loop of drive.

At the end the same section in *On Belief*, Žižek (OB 105) indicates that the fundamental narrative of Christianity, the story of the Fall, could be read as a parallel to the psychoanalytical conception of the emergence of the death drive: “The story of the

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<sup>274</sup> This excessiveness which prevents the full identity of man with himself is also how we should understand Žižek’s claim that what characterizes man is his inhuman dimension.

<sup>275</sup> As Žižek (PV 61) emphasizes elsewhere, the difference between desire and drive is precisely that “[...] desire is grounded in its constitutive lack, while drive circulates around a hole, a gap in the order of being.”

(Adam's) Fall is evidently the story of how the human animal contracted the excess of Life which makes him/her human – 'Paradise' is the name for the life delivered of the burden of this disturbing excess." So, perhaps we should reverse – in an admittedly completely anachronistic manner – the suggestion made by the German philosopher, Jakob Taubes (1957, 137), that Freud was the last great advocate of the Christian doctrine of Original Sin. Is not the Christian doctrine of Original Sin the first great advocacy of the Freudian notion of death drive? Is this not what Žižek hints at?

However, Žižek (OB 105) furthermore suggests that Christianity also releases or 'redeems' man from the excessiveness of the death drive: "Out of love for humanity, Christ then freely assumes, contracts onto himself, the excess ('Sin') which burdened the human race." Yet, this redemption does certainly not consist in the obliteration of this excess. The 'redemption' from the excess of death drive offered by Christianity is not a 'healing of the wound', but rather the possibility of accepting it. In short, in Žižek's Hegelian reading, the redemption is the wound, the Fall, itself. As he (MC 273; cf. TTS 71; PD 118; OWB 14) emphasizes repeatedly through his Hegelian reading of the Fall: "God does not first push us into sin in order to create the need for Salvation, and then offer himself as the Redeemer from the trouble into which he got us in the first place; it is not that the Fall is followed by Redemption: the Fall is *identical* to Redemption, it is "in itself" already Redemption."<sup>276</sup> So, what exactly is this redemption, this possibility that Christ opens up with his death, which is already the Fall itself? Žižek's (MC 273) answer is: "The explosion of freedom, the breaking out of the natural enchainment—and *this, precisely, is what happens in the Fall.*" Or, as he (PD 86) puts it elsewhere: "[...] for Christianity, the Fall is really not a Fall at all, but 'in itself' its very opposite, the emergence of freedom. There is no place from which we have fallen; what came before was just stupid natural existence." This returns us to the above-mentioned question of how more precisely we should understand this freedom that Žižek relates to the death drive. What does the freedom that the death drive enables look like?

### *The Freedom of Self-sabotage*

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<sup>276</sup> On Hegel's reading of the Fall, see Stephen Houlgate (2004, 83-92) "Religion, Morality and Forgiveness in Hegel's Philosophy."

As we already know, Žižek (FTKN 206; CWZ 94, 135; PV 202, 210, 231) clearly links death drive with freedom. The death drive as a ‘self-sabotaging structure’ is what enables a break with the determinism of both our natural instincts and our ‘second nature’ in terms of the cultural dialectic of law and desire in service of the pleasure principle. This rupture with the normal run of things made possible by the death drive represents, as Žižek (PV 231) puts it, ‘the minimum of freedom’. So, according to Žižek, freedom in its most elementary form is a rupture, a break with determinism. As he (PV 202) states in *The Parallax View*:

At its most elementary, freedom is not the freedom to do as you like (that is, to follow your inclinations without any externally imposed constraints), but to do what you do not want to do, to thwart the ‘spontaneous’ realization of an impetus. This is the link between freedom and the Freudian ‘death drive,’ which is also a drive to sabotage one’s inclination toward pleasure.<sup>277</sup>

It thus make good sense that Žižek (PV 202), just prior the quoted passage, defines the act of saying ‘no’ as the most elementary act of freedom.<sup>278</sup> But is this break really equal to freedom as such in Žižek’s perception? And if so, how are we to understand it without turning it into some kind of magical annulment of causality? A more careful reading of Žižek on this point will make clear that freedom can *not* simply be identified with a break with determinism; indeed in Žižek’s view freedom is itself in a certain sense a form for determinism or causality.

Thus, in relation to his discussion in *The Parallax View* of neuroscience, Žižek (PV 203) explicitly states that: “‘Freedom’ is not simply the opposite of deterministic causal necessity: as Kant knew, it means a specific mode of causality, the agent’s self-determination.” To further illustrate and elaborate what he means by this specific mode of causality, Žižek (PV 203) suggests that we should take as our starting point a kind of

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<sup>277</sup> Žižek ends this passage by stating that: “Here, Badiou is wrong: the elementary ethical gesture is a negative one, the one of blocking one’s direct inclination.” I will return to this claim in the next and final part of this section when I sketch out Žižek’s (TTS 160-161) objection against Badiou that the latter needs death drive as a ‘vanishing mediator’ between being and event.

<sup>278</sup> See also Žižek, “Neighbors and Other Monsters – A Plea for Ethical Violence,” 140.

Kantian antinomy of freedom. This antinomy consist in the following impasse: “[...] if an act is fully determined by preceding causes, it is, of course, not free; if, however, it depends on the pure contingency which momentarily severs the full causal chain, it is also not free.” There is only one way out of this impasse; the only solution of this Kantian antinomy of freedom is, according to Žižek, to introduce what he names a ‘second level reflexive causality’. And he (PV 203) describes how this specific mode of causality makes up freedom in this way: “I am determined by causes (be it direct brute natural causes or motivations), and the space of freedom is not a magic gap in this first-level causal chain but my ability retroactively to choose/determine which causes will determine me.”<sup>279</sup> Thus, a free act is not simply what sets off a new causal sequence; rather it is the retroactive act of indorsing which causal sequence will determine me.<sup>280</sup>

Žižek explains the retroactive character of this ‘second level reflexive causality’ through a useful opposition between what he terms the ‘ordinary historical notion of time’ and the notion of time displayed in a passage in Henri Bergson’s *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. In the ‘ordinary historical notion of time’, possibilities precede their realization, whereas the Bergsonian notion of time is characterized by the assertion that an act (realization) retrospectively opens up its own possibility. Rather than thinking of times as succeeding moments all loaded with multiple possibilities just waiting to be realized, according to the Bergsonian notion of time, an event only even becomes possible after it has happened, and so it is not determined by its past, rather it changes the past retrospectively by now appearing as a

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<sup>279</sup> Žižek (OWB 114) more explicitly relate this solution to Kant in *Organs without Bodies*: “As Kant already knew, freedom does not mean simply a cause that supplements material causes but means of a reflexive cause that determines which (material) cause will determines us. Freedom means that I am never entirely victim of circumstances: I always dispose of a minimum of freedom to determine which circumstances will determine me [...]”

<sup>280</sup> In *Organs without Bodies* Žižek (OWB 114) emphasizes how such a (retrospective) free act and the notion of time that it presupposes is conditioned by the ontological incompleteness of reality: “The solution [to how to account for the possibility of a ‘second level reflexive causality’] lies precisely in the notion of noncompleteness of physical causality: freedom retroactively determines the causal chain that comes to determine me, and this minimal space of choice is sustained by the inherent indeterminacy of the physical processes themselves.”



(realized) possibility.<sup>281</sup> Žižek (PV 201-203) illustrates this point with a reference to a scene from Steven Spielberg's film *Minority Report*. In this scene, the main-character of the film (played by Tom Cruise) is on the verge of shooting his son's murderer (as he was predetermined to do according to the visions of the three 'precognitives'), but blocks his own decision. According to Žižek, this negative act is a genuine act of freedom precisely because: "It does not simply 'change the future'; it changes the future by changing the past itself (in the Bergsonian sense of inserting a new possibility into it)." Although Kant is certainly *the* philosopher of freedom, in Žižek's (PV 94) view, freedom is not, as this film-example also makes clear, an invariant noumenal foundation, but rather a momentary break that happens from time to time.

Let me end this exposition of Žižek's conception of freedom by noting that it is not merely Kant to whom Žižek relates this notion of freedom as the retrospective act of determining the causes that determine me. In *The Ticklish Subject* he describes Nicolas Malebranche's occasionalist doctrine of grace in somewhat similar terms. Thus, at the end of the section entitled 'Towards a materialist Theory of Grace', Žižek (TTS 118-119) explains how: "Malebranche is not afraid to draw the radical conclusion: at the level of content, everything is decided [...] God prompts us, produces feelings and movements in us; we are completely ruled by motives. The margin of freedom lies only in the subject's capacity to withhold or grant his consent from or to a motive – freedom is a power 'which the soul has, to suspend or to give consent to motives, which naturally follow interesting perceptions'." And with this rather brief suggestion, I will now move on to the final part of this section and thus the conclusion of the present chapter, namely the critique raised by Žižek against Badiou in regard to the notion of death drive.

### **Concluding Remarks on Badiou and the Death Drive**

As I have already implied (in this chapter as well as in the second chapter), Žižek has some serious critical concerns in terms of Badiou's (E 38-39, 90; LW 509) hostility towards the Freudian notion of death drive. Indeed, in *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek (TTS 145) even proposes that: "When Badiou adamantly opposes the 'morbid obsession with death', when he opposes the

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<sup>281</sup> Bergson (2007b) presents a short and very instructive account of this argument in his brilliant essay "The Possible and the Real."

Truth-Event to the death drive, and so on, he is at his weakest, succumbing to the *temptation of the non-thought*.” What Žižek considers to be non-thought in Badiou’s philosophy I will return to in a moment. In a brief excursion in his 2008 book *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Žižek offers two explanations for Badiou’s (mistaken) opposition to the notion of death drive. The first reason for Badiou’s reluctance is, according to Žižek, due to the fact that he relates the death drive to the ‘religious’ motif of finitude. But, as we have just seen in the above, in Žižek’s view the death drive has nothing to do with the pathos of finitude and obsession with mortality, on the contrary. So, as Žižek (IDLC 395) puts it, “What Badiou misses here is the fact that ‘death drive’ is, paradoxically, the Freudian name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis: for an uncanny excess of life, for an ‘undead’ urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption.” The second reason for Badiou’s dismissal of the death drive is, according to Žižek (IDLC 394), an all too crude opposition in Badiou’s (e.g. IT 62; D 91-92) philosophy between the rupture of the event as the introduction of genuine novelty and repetition as an obstacle for the rise of anything truly new.<sup>282</sup>

But, why does Žižek, as is clear from the above-quoted passage from *The Ticklish Subject*, find Badiou’s opposition to the notion of death drive so problematic? Or, to put it in other words, what is it that Badiou, according to Žižek, leaves unthought when he dismisses this notion? As demonstrated by Adrian Johnston (2007d, 165) in an article on Žižek’s reading of Badiou, the heart of the matter in Žižek’s critique of Badiou’s hostility to the notion of death drive is not this hostility as such, but a more fundamental matter concerning the very core of Badiou’s theory of the subject, namely the question of how Badiou explains what makes a mere human animal, caught up in a life dictated entirely by its self-interests and desire, capable of suddenly taking the decision to be true to an event and thus becomes a subject of truth. Or, to put it in terms of Badiou’s Pauline formula of ‘not...but’: What is it that enables the

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<sup>282</sup> In terms of this (important) issue of the relationship between difference and repetition, Žižek (IDLC 396) is for once on the side of Badiou’s rival: “It is at this point that one should turn to Deleuze against Badiou, to Deleuze’s precise elaborations on repetition as the very form of the emergence of the New.” Žižek (OWB 9-15) elaborates his reflections on the notion of repetition (and the question of the new) in Deleuze in *Organs without Bodies*.

individual under the law to withdraw from ('not') the law, from the path of the flesh, in order to affirm ('but') the exception of the gracious event and thus becomes a subject, entering the path of the spirit?

Žižek touches upon this matter in his extensive discussion in *The Ticklish Subject* of the differences between Badiou's philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In the section entitled 'The Lacanian Subject', Žižek (TTS 159) outlines what he takes to be the core of the matter: "That is the difference between Lacan and Badiou: Lacan insists on the primacy of the (negative) act over the positive establishment of a 'new harmony' [...] while for Badiou, the different facets of negativity [...] are reduced to so many versions of 'betrayal' of (or infidelity to, or denial of) the positive Truth-event." It is undoubtedly correct that Badiou, at least prior to *Logics of Worlds*, seems to describe any negative mode of relationship to an event as a disqualification for being a subject; that is, anyone who denies an event can of course never become a subject, and anyone who betrays his fidelity to an event is no longer a subject.<sup>283</sup> But, the question is, whether Badiou, as Žižek seems to imply, refuses negativity *as such* in regard to the subject. Nevertheless, Žižek (TTS 159) is completely right, when he in the succeeding paragraph states that: "This difference between Badiou and Lacan concerns the precise status of the subject: Badiou's main point is to avoid identifying the subject with the constitutive void of the structure [...]." Badiou (BE 432; C 202-203; IT 86) has himself on more than one occasion declared this as the crucial difference between Lacanian psychoanalysis and his own philosophy. Žižek (TTS 159-160) elaborates further on this difference between Lacan and Badiou concerning the subject in the following way:

For Badiou [...] the subject is consubstantial with a contingent act of Decision; while Lacan introduces the distinction between the subject and the gesture of subjectivization: what Badiou [...] describe[s] is the process of subjectivization – the emphatic engagement, the assumption of fidelity to the Event [...] while the subject is the negative gesture of breaking out of the constraints of Being that opens up the space of possible subjectivization. In Lacanese, the

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<sup>283</sup> In *Logics of World* Badiou (LW 45-78) revises his theory of the subject, so that the category now designates, not only the faithful subject, but three subjective figures, namely besides the faithful subject, also the two 'negative' figures of the 'reactive subject' and the 'obscure subject'.

subject prior to subjectivization is the pure negativity of the death drive [...].

In other words, according to Žižek, Badiou wrongly equates the subject with the process of subjectivization, that is, to put it in Badiou's terms, with the 'operation' of decision, fidelity and forcing by means of which we pass from being a mere human animal to becoming a subject of truth. What Badiou misses here is in Žižek's (TTS 160) view the negative moment or dimension that grounds the decision to affirm the event, the dimension that makes it possible to engage in a fidelity to an event in the first place. And this dimension is precisely the self-sabotaging dimension of the death drive. Or as, Žižek (TTS 160) puts it:

The Lacanian death drive (a category Badiou adamantly opposes) is thus a kind of 'vanishing mediator' between Being and Event: there is a 'negative' gesture constitutive of the subject which is then obfuscated in 'Being' (the established ontological order) and in fidelity to the Event.

But, is the suggestion made by Žižek here, that Badiou dismisses any element of negation from his theory of the subject, really a fair depiction of Badiou's theory of the subject? Although Badiou does indeed emphasize the affirmative character of the process of subjectivization, does he not also, for example in his book on Paul, imply – by employing the Pauline expression of 'not...but' as a formula for the (divided) subject – that becoming a subject does in fact include an element of negation? To put it in other words, if the issue here is whether Badiou's theory of the subject includes a negative dimension or not, I do not find Žižek's critique completely fair. But, if the issue is whether or not Badiou manages to account properly for this negative moment, there is no doubt that Žižek is right in his critique. This second issue is made much more evident by Eric L. Santner (2005, 112), who has raised a similar critique against Badiou. In an excursion on Badiou in his chapter in the anthology *The Neighbour*, Santner very instructively points out the core of the problem in Badiou's conception of the relationship between the pre-evental merely mortal human animal and the post-evental immortal subject of truth. He formulates it this way:

The 'vital disorganization' inaugurated by a 'truth-event' happens not simply to an animal pursuing its predatory interests but one whose animal life has already been amplified – one might even say

disrupted, disorganized – by what Freud referred to as *Tribschicksal* or ‘drive destiny’. What Badiou seems to lose sight of here is, in a word, nothing less than the difference between animal instinct and human drive.

In sum, according to Žižek (and Santner) the Freudian notion of death drive, and more generally Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis, would provide Badiou with an anti-humanist anthropology that, as a necessary supplement to his purely formal theory of the subject, would allow him to explain more precisely what it is about the human animal that makes it capable, in contrast to all other animals, of breaking with its immediate needs and desires in order to dedicate itself to a Cause beyond its own self-interests, in short, to become a subject of truth.

## Chapter 5

### From a Perverse to a Suffering God – Žižek's Materialist Reading of Chesterton<sup>284</sup>

*Christianity is the only  
religion on earth that has  
felt that omnipotence  
made God incomplete.*

Gilbert K. Chesterton

#### Introduction

In chapter three I have argued that theology and materialism do not automatically exclude one another; that the relationship between them is not necessarily of an antagonistic or oppositional character. In the present and final chapter of this dissertation I want to raise the stakes: not only is the relationship between Christian theology and materialism not of an oppositional character, it is in fact of a dialectical character. Or at least, this is what I will be arguing that Žižek asserts.

In the opening lines of his 'Introduction' to *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek (PD 3) makes the suggestion that the time has come to reverse Walter Benjamin's (2002, 253) first thesis from *Thesis on the Philosophy of History* in which he famously proposed that 'historical materialism can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the service of theology.' In other words, Žižek's suggestion here seems to be, that if theology is to realize its full potential, it has to enrol the service of materialism. This reading is affirmed by Žižek (PD 6) when he, just a few pages later, elaborates and supplements his opening reversal of

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<sup>284</sup> The responses to Žižek's theological engagement are growing rapidly both in the more general reception of his work (e.g. Kay (2003), Butler (2005), Sharpe and Boucher (2010)) and in theological circles (e.g. Blanton (2004), Boer (2007), Crockett (2007), Depoortere (2007b), Kotsko (2006; 2008a; 2008b; 2010), Milbank (2005; 2009; 2010), Pound (2008)). Thus, many of the theological themes (e.g. sacrifice, belief, law, agape, incarnation, the trinity, grace, iconoclasm, monotheism) and several of the theological thinkers (e.g. Paul, Pascal, Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard) touched upon by Žižek have been discussed in the reception of his work. However, as far as I know, there exists no account that focuses explicitly on Žižek's reading of Chesterton, even though the latter is a key-figure in Žižek's theological considerations.

Benjamin's thesis by advancing the following remarkable assertion:

My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach—and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.

The first thing to notice here is how Žižek has italicized 'only' thus emphasizing, as I have just implied, that if Christianity (and Christian theology) is to access its own subversive potential, then it *must* necessarily enlist the service of materialism. The other crucial thing to notice is of course that Žižek stresses the reciprocity of this claim. In brief: *genuine materialism and Christian theology mutually presuppose each other*. My approach in what follows will be to unfold the meaning and implications of this assertion of a dialectical relationship between theology and materialism through an account of Žižek's reading of the English literary critic, novelist, poet, and writer of detective stories, but also 'amateur theologian', Gilbert Keith Chesterton.<sup>285</sup> Chesterton is mentioned in Žižek's (FTKN 29, 192; EYS 83) work as early as in *For They Do Not Know and Enjoy Your Symptom!* in which he refers to the hints made by Chesterton at the end of his well-known 'Defence of Detective Stories' of how the law is itself scandalously founded upon an act of transgression. Yet, it is not until after his more extensive engagement with Christianity in *The Fragile Absolute* and *On Belief* that Žižek seriously considers Chesterton's theological writing. In the succeeding period, however, Chesterton has been

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<sup>285</sup> Although it is perhaps not customary to consider Chesterton a theologian, as Aidan Nichols (2008, xi) notes in the introduction to his book *G.K. Chesterton – Theologian*, Chesterton has nevertheless written extensively on theological issues and Christianity in general. Among other things he has published a highly estimated commentary on Thomas Aquinas and in *Orthodoxy* – a work that Žižek (MC 48) designates as 'Chesterton's theological masterpiece', he sets out to "[...] discuss the actual fact that the central Christian theology (sufficiently summarized in the Apostles' Creed) is the best root of energy and sound ethics" (Chesterton 2007, 5). Thus, even if Chesterton is not a theologian by profession, he is indeed, to borrow Stratford Caldecott's (1998) expression, an 'amateur theologian' and in the best meaning of the word.

one of Žižek's most recurrent and important theological references.<sup>286</sup>

The reason why Žižek's reading of Chesterton constitutes a particularly good illustration of the dialectical relationship that he claims exists between theology and materialism is that this reading, which is overtly sympathetic but nevertheless also critical, follows a trajectory of a displacement in Chesterton's theological thought that goes from an idealist to a proper materialist dialectic. To phrase it in Žižek's Lacanian vocabulary: a displacement from a theology grounded in the 'masculine' logic of the 'constitutive exception' to a theology grounded in the 'feminine' logic of 'not-All'.<sup>287</sup> Or, in terms of the concept of God: a displacement from a (perverse) omniscient and omnipotent God to a (suffering) doubtful and impotent God. This theological displacement is at the centre of Žižek's reading of Chesterton, but he touches upon some of the ontological, ethical and political consequences related to this displacement as well.<sup>288</sup> Besides this issue of the relationship between theology

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<sup>286</sup> In addition to the second chapter entitled "The Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy" in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek has dedicated two essays explicitly to Chesterton, namely: "Hegel – Chesterton: German Idealism and Christianity" published in the Lacanian journal *The Symptom* in 2006 and "From Job to Christ: A Pauline Reading of Chesterton", which is basically an extended version of the 2006 text, printed in the 2009 anthology *Paul among the Philosophers*. Furthermore, Chesterton plays a decisive part in the argument that Žižek unfolds in his 2007 article "Towards a Materialist Theology". As the titles suggest, all four of these texts revolve around theological matters. It is, however, in *The Monstrosity of Christ* that Žižek refers most extensively to Chesterton and theology, but this is partly due to the fact that the first of his two contributions to this volume include a compilation of the aforementioned texts on Chesterton (minus the chapter in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*). In contrast, the second contribution contains a few 'new' comments on Chesterton in relation to Žižek's discussion with John Milbank. In addition to these texts, which explicitly focus on Chesterton, there are lots of scattered references to the latter on several different matters in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, *Bodies with Organs*, *The Parallax View*, *In Defense of Lost Causes* and *Violence*.

<sup>287</sup> I described the difference between these two 'logics' (and their relationship to the issue of materialism and idealism) in detail in chapter three, but Žižek (MC 88-89) also gives a concise and clear account of them in his first essay in *The Monstrosity of Christ*.

<sup>288</sup> Žižek deals with the ontological consequences in the essay "Toward a Materialist Theology" (21f.), the ethical consequences in the last part of "From Job to Christ – A Pauline Reading of Chesterton" (50f.) and the political consequences in the final chapter in the *Monstrosity of Christ* (MC



and materialism, what also makes Žižek's reading of Chesterton worthy of consideration is that it offers a helpful way to encircle and contextualize Žižek's own position in a broader theological landscape. These matters will be in focus (particularly) in the second section of this chapter. I will, however, begin my exposition with an outline of Žižek's critical account in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* of Chesterton's so-called 'Doctrine of Conditional Joy' as an illustration of the 'perverse' version of Christianity, which according to Žižek (PD 53) "[...] forms the very core of 'really existing Christianity'." Thus, although Žižek is first of all interested in the critical and political potential of Christianity, his theological engagement includes a critique of religion as well; yet, a critique of religion, which, as Žižek himself fully acknowledges, is implicit to – at least part of – the Christian theological tradition itself.

### **The Perverse Core of Christianity**

Žižek's first extensive involvement with Chesterton, which is also his first real theological engagement with him, takes place in the second chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* entitled 'The Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy' (an explicit reference to Chesterton, who uses this phrase in one of the essays in his book *Orthodoxy*). The chapter begins with an exposition of the 'basic matrix of paradoxical self-negating reversal', which, according to Žižek (PD 35-36), constitutes the most 'Hegelian' and 'subversive' feature of Chesterton's work. More precisely, this 'basic matrix' is, as Žižek (PD 35-36) explains, characterized by the dialectical process in which "[...] the external opposition (between Law and its criminal transgression) is transformed into the opposition, internal to the transgression itself, between particular transgressions and the absolute transgression that appears as its opposite, as universal Law." The basic insight at stake here is perhaps best illustrated with one of Žižek's absolute favourite references, namely Bertolt Brecht's famous proverb: 'What is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of new bank.' Chesterton (2007, 131) deploys this dialectical matrix to expose, among other things, the inconsistency of so-called 'liberal' critics of religion who in their fierce battle to free man from religious oppression end up sacrificing the very thing

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288f.). However, it is beyond the scope of the present chapter to go further into and give an exhaustive exposition of these consequences.

(freedom) they were fighting for. By drawing parallels to the current so-called ‘defence’ of liberal democratic values through the torture of terrorists who threaten these values, and more generally to the message of contemporary post-ideological ‘politics’, that instead of trying to change the world, we should refashion ourselves through new ‘subversive’ forms of subjective practices, Žižek (PD 37-38) emphasizes the relevance of this matrix.

*Being the Instrument of the Big Other*

However, Žižek is first of all interested in Chesterton’s ‘basic matrix’, because it constitutes a useful means to disclose the *perverse* logic, which, according Žižek (TTS 248; OB 20), not only manifests itself in exceptional situations such as the aforementioned ‘torture of terrorists in the name of democracy’, but also constitutes one of the most decisive and tricky aspects of contemporary late-capitalist society.<sup>289</sup> Capitalism has, as Marx and Engels (2002, 223) famously note in *The Communist Manifesto*, played a ‘revolutionary part’ in history in the sense that it ‘melts all solid into the air’ including the hierarchical and prohibitive structures of a traditional authoritarian social order. Yet, these traditional social structures served not simply as a suppressive mechanism, but also notably as the background against which man could assert his freedom. And according to Žižek (PD 53), perversion should be seen precisely as an attempt or a strategy to cope with a (modern) situation in which “[...] we can no longer rely on the preestablished Dogma to sustain our freedom, on the preestablished Law/Prohibition to sustain our transgression [...]”. Yet, to understand this claim fully we need to clarify the term ‘perversion’, which Žižek perceives in a broader sense than it is normally understood. More precisely, he extends the term beyond the sexual context to which it is traditionally linked, applying it instead primarily to political situations – thus for instance describing Stalinism and Nazism as utterly perverse political ideologies (e.g. TN 195; OB 139; IDLC 227; PF 69; CWZ 114, 127-128).

Like Lacan, Žižek (HTRL 105; Evans 2010, 139) defines the ‘pervert’ as ‘a person who assumes the position of object-

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<sup>289</sup> This is a thesis which Žižek takes over from Lacan, who, in his late work, regards perversion as a ‘generalized hegemonic social structure’ (Chiesa 2007, 7).

instrument of the will of the big Other'.<sup>290</sup> A relevant example of a pervert, that Žižek (PD 16) himself refers to in the first chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, could be Judas. At least if we think of Judas in the terms proposed by Žižek (PD 15); that is, as someone who sacrifices his own salvation and assumes the role of the necessary tool in the greater Cause of God's salvation of mankind.<sup>291</sup> But, why would anyone do this? Žižek's Lacanian answer is: Because the pervert finds enjoyment in occupying this instrumental position. More precisely, the pervert's enjoyment derives, as Žižek (TN 71; PV 303; HTRL 105) notes, from the fact that he conceives of himself as absolved from (the responsibility of) his own actions insofar that he is merely a tool in the hands of the big Other's will. Think, for instance, of the meticulous bureaucrat who with an ill-concealed satisfaction in his voice tells you: 'Sorry, but I am just following the rules.'<sup>292</sup> Yet, another trait of perversion is, according to Žižek (TN 71; TTS 248), that the pervert, in contrast to for example the hysteric, knows the will of the big Other. Again, think of the bureaucrat who rhetorically asks you: 'don't you think I know the rules.' However, what is particularly in focus in Žižek's interest in perversion is the question of the law. As Žižek (PF 17) explains in *The Plague of Fantasies*, what distinguishes the pervert is that:

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<sup>290</sup> As Žižek (HTRL 7-21) notes in his exposition of the notion in *How to Read Lacan* the 'big Other' has several features. Here the 'big Other' (operating at the symbolic level) is understood in its primary sense as 'the subject's presupposition of an ideal order that guarantees the ultimate meaning and consistency of the subject's experience' (EYS 58).

<sup>291</sup> Of course Judas' betrayal takes on an even more perverse character if we, as Žižek (PD 15) suggests, see it as provoked by the 'secret injunction' in Christ's statement to his disciples that 'truly, one of you will betray me' (Matt. 26:21). As Žižek (PD 16) stresses, in a certain sense, "[...] the entire fate of Christianity, its innermost kernel, hinges on the possibility of interpreting this act [Christ's injunction to betray him] in a non-perverse way."

<sup>292</sup> A more extreme version of this example would be the Nazi-criminal Adolf Eichmann. Thus, according to Žižek (CWZ 127-128; cf. PF 300), Eichmann cannot be properly understood in Hannah Arendt's terms of 'the banality of evil'; that is, as an 'ordinary' man caught up in bureaucratic machinery, eager to fulfil his duty, promoting his career and so on. In contrast to Arendt's claim, Žižek (CWZ 127-128) argues that Eichmann was indeed a pervert; that we need to see his behaviour (and the behaviour of Nazi-bureaucrats in general) as closely tied to an 'obscene economy of enjoyment'.

[...] in contrast to the ‘normal’ subject, for whom the law functions as the agency of prohibition which regulates (access to the object of) his desire, for the pervert, the object of his desire is Law itself – the Law is the Ideal he is longing for, he wants to be fully acknowledged by the Law, integrated into its functioning ...

Thus, in sum, Žižek counter-intuitively portrays the pervert not as a subversive rebel who liberates the repressed flipside of normality, but as a closet-conservative whose transgressions (and the pleasure he gets from these) are intimately tied to a secret belief in the Law as such, or in other words, in the existence of the big Other. As Žižek (TTS 247) stresses, ‘perversion is not subversion’. Quite the contrary, perversion is a conservative ‘solution’ to the problem of the decline of authorities, or in theological terms, the death of God.<sup>293</sup> And now, let’s return to Chesterton.

#### *The Limit of ‘Conditional Joy’*

Despite his obvious veneration for Chesterton, Žižek nevertheless, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, presents a severe critique of him. More precisely, Žižek’s critique is aimed at the kind of principle or logic best captured in what Chesterton half-jokingly calls the ‘Doctrine of Conditional Joy’. And as we shall see, the issue of perversion is at the very heart of this critique. But first, let us take a closer look at Chesterton’s doctrine.

In chapter four of *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton (2007, 40) sets out in his typical counter-intuitive manner to show how fairy tales are not only not pure non-sense, but indeed ‘entirely reasonable things’. And, to cut a long story short, his argument is that what makes them reasonable is precisely that they follow the logic summarized in the ‘Doctrine of Conditional Joy’. So, what is the

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<sup>293</sup> In *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek (PD 53) describes this ‘solution’ in the following way: “[...] today’s desperate neoconservative attempts to reassert ‘old values’ are also ultimately a failed perverse strategy of imposing prohibitions that can no longer be taken seriously.” It is, according to Žižek (HTRL 91-92), against this backdrop that we should understand Lacan’s reversal, in *Seminar II*, of Dostoevsky’s famous suggestion in *The Brothers Karamazov*: if God does not exist, the result is not, as Dostoevsky suggests, that everything is permitted, but on the contrary, that nothing at all is permitted. Or, as Žižek (HTRL 92) puts it: “Instead of bringing freedom, the fall of the oppressive authority [...] gives rise to new and sterner prohibitions.”

message of this doctrine? Chesterton (2007, 46) describes it in this way:

The note of the fairy utterance always is, ‘You may live in a palace of gold and sapphire, *if* you do not say the word ‘cow’’; or ‘You may live happily with the King’s daughter, *if* you do not show her an onion.’ This vision always hangs upon a veto. All the dizzy and colossal things depend upon a small thing withheld. All the wild and whirling things that are let loose depend upon one thing that is forbidden.

This quote offers two important insights. First, it illustrates the fundamental message of the Doctrine of Conditional Joy, namely that our joy is always conditioned by an omission, that we can only enjoy something fully, *if* we at the same time renounce something else. In other words, the basic ‘you-may-if-you-don’t’ structure of the ‘Doctrine of Conditional Joy’ is equivalent to the (‘masculine’) logic of a constitutive exception, which Žižek (MC 82-101), as we saw in chapter three, relates to idealism. The second thing that the quote illustrates is that this founding exception is completely arbitrary: The exception that allows me to live in a palace of gold and sapphire is that I do not say the word ‘cow’. And more importantly, according to Žižek (PD 41-42), Chesterton implies that the function of this arbitrary limitation (‘*if* you don’t say cow’) of our access (‘you may live in’) to an object (‘a palace’) is to remind us that this object “[...] is given to us through an inexplicable arbitrary miraculous gesture of divine gift [...].” What is crucial in the present context is that although the Doctrine of Conditional Joy is here related to fairy tales, for Chesterton this doctrine summarizes, as Žižek (PD 41) notes, ‘the basic Christian lesson’ contained in fairy tales.

If we now turn to Žižek’s exposition of Chesterton’s position in the second chapter of *The Puppet of the Dwarf*, we cannot fail to notice how, after having provided a series of entertaining illustrations of the logic at stake in Chesterton’s Doctrine of Conditional Joy, what appeared to be unreserved enthusiasm is quite abruptly replaced by a far more critical attitude. The starting point of Žižek’s critique is Chesterton’s inversion in the last chapter of *Orthodoxy* of the well-known and widespread conception that paganism as a joyful affirmation of life, while Christianity is supposed to force a regime of renunciation and

guilt upon life. Against this conception Chesterton's (2007, 149; cf. PD 48) makes the following claim:

The outer ring of Christianity is a rigid guard of ethical abnegations and professional priests; but inside that inhuman guard you find the old human life dancing like children, and drinking wine like men; for Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom.

Clearly Chesterton's message in this passage is that Christianity serves as the exception which in fact *allows* us to enjoy the pleasures of paganism. Thus in other words, the underlying logic is the same as the 'you-may-if-you-don't' structure of the Doctrine of Conditional Joy: You may enjoy your pagan freedom, if you do not believe in pagan Gods, that is, if you are a good Christian. But, what is the problem with this claim?

Žižek's incriminating answer is that this claim demonstrates the properly *perverse* nature of Chesterton's Doctrine of Conditional Joy. In Chesterton's reading of Christianity (in terms of the Doctrine of Conditional Joy) the Christian, like the pervert, is enabled to indulge in pleasures ('dancing like children and drinking wine like men') not despite of, but precisely because of his act of renunciation ('rigid guard of ethical abnegations and professional priests'). Like the pervert, the enjoyment of being a Christian is conditioned by a belief in prohibition, or in more general terms, the Law, the big Other. Although, the focus here is on Chesterton's reading of Christianity, according to Žižek (PD 53), this logic of perversion applies not merely for this particular reading, but is at the 'very core of really existing Christianity.' Žižek (PD 15-19) elaborates on this logic on several occasions throughout *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (subtitled precisely *The Perverse Core of Christianity*), describing among other things in the opening of the book how the 'Christian pervert' conjures a perverse God; that is, a God who incites man to sin only so that he afterwards, by sacrificing himself, can redeem man. Or, in terms of the law: God only gave the law to generate sin, so that he afterwards could assert himself as an omnipotent God with the power to absolve man from this sin (PD 118; cf. TTS 148).

However, to be correct, Žižek (PD 53) does not simply characterize Chesterton's reading of Christianity, and more generally 'the core of existing Christianity', as perverse, but as a perverse *solution*. More precisely it is, according to Žižek (PD 53), a perverse solution to the abovementioned problem of 'the

fall of authorities' related to the rise of modernity. Yet, Žižek's own understanding of Christianity also invites another more paradoxical reading: Namely that the Christian claim, that if we just believe that God sacrificed himself for our sins, then we are allowed to indulge in all kinds of transgressions, is a perverse 'solution' to a problem that grew out of Christianity's own declaration of the death of God. In this perspective, the Christian is a 'pervert' insofar as he represses the message of the non-existence of the big Other, which subsists at the very heart of Christianity itself in terms of Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross. Thus, in a certain sense we can say that Žižek here exerts a critique of religion against Christianity which it is actually itself the root of; at least if we understand Christianity, as Žižek (PD 171) suggests we should, as the 'religion of atheism' that 'attacks the religious hard core that survives in every belief in the existence of the big Other'. And so, to paraphrase Žižek (PD 16), we could say that the 'entire fate of Christianity, its innermost kernel, relies on the possibility of a non-perverse reading of the death of God', that is, a reading in which God does not live on unaffected of his own death, remaining the exceptional guarantor of our deeds. In summary, the essence of Žižek's objection against Chesterton is that although Chesterton's writings contain the means to expose the logic of perversion imbuing our present culture, in the end his own version of Christianity obeys the very same logic – thereby maintaining the 'religious hard core' which it was supposed to be critical of.

Against this background the burning question is of course: Is not another reading of Christianity, a reading which is not based upon the structure of the Doctrine of Conditional Joy, a reading which does not abide by the logic of perversion, possible? Žižek not only raises this question, he also indicates a possible answer. Thus, towards the end of his chapter on Chesterton in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek (PD 51-52) proclaims that: "The crucial question here is: how does this 'Doctrine of Conditional Joy' relate to the Pauline suspension of our full commitment to earthly social obligations [...]" As Žižek (PD 53) explains, he understands this 'Pauline suspension' as a stance or an attitude that consists in living our lives in an *as if not* mode; that is, living, as he put it paraphrasing 1 Corinthians (7:29-31), in a way in which 'you mourn as if you were not mourning, rejoice as if you were not rejoicing, buy as if you had no possessions',

and so on.<sup>294</sup> Now, let me cite Žižek's (PD 52) answer to his 'crucial question' of the relationship between Chesterton's Doctrine of Conditional Joy and the Pauline attitude of 'as if not' in its full length:

Are they two versions of the same principle? Are they not, rather, two opposed principles? In the 'Doctrine of Conditional Joy', the Exception (be home by midnight, etc.) allows us fully to rejoice, while the Pauline as if mode deprives us of the ability fully to rejoice by displacing the external limit into an internal one: the limit is no longer the one between rejoicing in life and its exception (renunciation), it runs in the midst of rejoicing, that is, we have to rejoice as if we are not rejoicing. The limit of Chesterton is clearly perceptible in his insistence on the need for firm external standards [...].

Again, Žižek's basic objection against Chesterton's reading of Christianity here is that, due to his 'insistence on the need for firm external standards', or to put it in terms of the Doctrine of Conditional Joy, his insistence on an exception constitutive to our (transgressive) behaviour, he remains within the framework of perversion. Now, the question, to which we shall turn in the next section, is: Is it possible to present another reading of Chesterton, a reading in which his conception of Christianity does not rest on the logic of perversion outlined above? That is, perhaps a more Pauline reading of Chesterton?

### **A Pauline Reading of Chesterton**

In the opening of his 2009 essay "From Job to Christ: A Pauline reading of Chesterton", Žižek (cf. FTKN 29, 78) affirms the standard view according to which Paul is the founder of Christianity insofar that he bestowed it with its most essential trait by shifting the centre from the acts and teachings of Jesus to the minimal message of Christ's death and resurrection as an act of salvation.<sup>295</sup> Or, to be correct: Žižek does in fact, and quite

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<sup>294</sup> Žižek (PD 111-112) elaborates more thoroughly on this later on in the book during his discussion of Giorgio Agamben's reading of Paul in *The Time That Remains*. Here Agamben (2005, 23f.) presents a more extensive reading of 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 and in particular of the Pauline formula 'as if not' or 'as not' (w'j mh\), which seems to be Žižek's model.

<sup>295</sup> Let me just note in passing that Žižek (FTKN 78; cf. 29) already advances this type of reading of Paul in *For They Do Not Know* in which he notes how Paul's "[...] rereading of the death of Christ gave Christianity its definitive contours."



symptomatically, omit the resurrection, focusing entirely on the death of Christ (an issue I will return to later).<sup>296</sup> According to Žižek, this theme of the death of God still constitutes a challenge today, and for reasons which are indeed consistent with the critique of the ‘perverse core’ of ‘really existing Christianity’ that he presents in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. Or, as he formulates it himself: “Today, two thousand years later, this death of God is still an enigma: how to read it outside the pagan-mythic topic of divine sacrifice or the legalistic topic of exchange (payment for sins)?”<sup>297</sup> As we shall see, Žižek’s claim is basically that Chesterton, if he is read properly, offers us the potential for a non-perverse reading of the death of God. Indeed, his claim is even that it was “[...] Chesterton, who thought through the notion of the ‘death of God’ to its radical conclusion: only in Christianity God himself has to go through atheism.”<sup>298</sup> Thus, in what follows I will sketch out how Žižek identifies a displacement in Chesterton’s theological thought towards a conception of God which is consistent with a non-perverse reading of the death of God. This displacement moreover includes the potential for a shift ‘towards a materialist theology.’

#### *To Have Done with External Standards*

In his reading of Chesterton in the essay “From Job to Christ”, Žižek begins where we left him in the previous section, that is, with a critique of what he in the above quote from *The Puppet and the Dwarf* described as Chesterton’s ‘need for firm external standards’, or in other words, his reliance on the (‘masculine’) logic of a constitutive exception. More precisely, Žižek’s point of departure is Chesterton’s famous ‘metaphysical thriller’ *The Man Who Was Thursday*, which, along with his short “Introduction to the Book of Job” and a few detours to *Orthodoxy*, constitutes the main textual basis of the reading of Chesterton that Žižek presents in this essay.

In a key passage from the first part of this novel, Chesterton (1986, 44-46) describes the important episode which leads to the recruitment of the book’s main-character, named Syme, into a special taskforce of ‘philosophical policemen’ formed to fight nihilist philosophers and their political equivalents, anarchists. In brief, Syme accidentally encounters a police officer who arouses

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<sup>296</sup> Žižek, “From Job to Christ: A Pauline Reading of Chesterton,” 39.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

his curiosity when he reveals that he is a member of a special taskforce exclusively engaged in fighting philosophers, who, as he tells Syme, are far more dangerous than regular criminals. Why? Well, as it is explained to Syme, an ordinary crook, a thief for example, might violate a particular law by stealing, but his very wish to acquire more property shows that he nevertheless respects the idea of personal property; he just wants more of it for himself. Philosophers, on the other hand, disrespect the very idea of property as such; or, in short, philosophers not only disrespect a particular law; they disrespect the Law as such.

As I have mentioned earlier, Žižek definitely acknowledged the dialectical, even Hegelian, element in Chesterton's writing, nevertheless his basic complaint against Chesterton in his discussion of the passage from *The Man Who Was Thursday* summarised above is precisely that he is not dialectical, or rather Hegelian, enough. Because, as Žižek puts it, "What Chesterton doesn't get is that *universal(ized) crime is no longer a crime—it sublates (negates/overcomes) itself as crime and turns from transgression into a new order.*"<sup>299</sup> And as he additionally explains, the crucial point that Chesterton does not recognize (at least at this point in the novel) is that the universalized crime that he assigns to the philosopher/anarchist lawbreaker should also be assigned to the lawmaker who in his act of instituting the law of Order does nothing different than the anarchist whose transgression aims at instituting the law of Chaos. Instead of acknowledging that the antagonism between crime and law is internal to the law itself, Chesterton indirectly insists on the need for the law as a firm external standard. Žižek summarizes his critique in the following manner:

What Chesterton fails to perceive is that the 'universalized crime' that he projects into 'lawless modern philosophy' and its political equivalent, the anarchist movement that aims at destroying the totality of civilized life, *is already realized in guise of the existing rule of law*, so that antagonism between Law and crime reveals itself to be inherent to crime, the antagonism between universal and particular crime.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Žižek, "From Job to Christ: A Pauline Reading of Chesterton," 40. Žižek (PD 42-53) advances a similar objection against Chesterton of not 'being Hegelian enough' in the second chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*.

<sup>300</sup> Žižek, "From Job to Christ: A Pauline Reading of Chesterton," 41.

However, immediately after raising this critique of Chesterton, Žižek continues his discussion of *The Man Who Was Thursday* by modifying the very same critique. Thus, stressing that although Chesterton implicitly distinguishes between law and crime in the passage on the philosopher-criminal in the beginning of the novel, asserting law as an external standard, at the end of the novel he nevertheless very explicitly confirms the identity of crime and law.<sup>301</sup> To understand Žižek's modification of his critique we will have to see how Chesterton enacts this identification of law and crime at the conclusion of *The Man Who Was Thursday*. However, to do this properly, we first need just a little more information about the plot of Chesterton's novel.

After his encounter with the police officer from the special taskforce of philosopher-fighting policemen described above, the main character of the novel, Syme, is recruited by the mysterious Chief of this taskforce (reduced to a 'heavy voice' in a 'pitch-dark room'), who sends him on a secret mission to penetrate the seven-member 'Central Anarchist Council' in charge of a powerful organization minded to annihilate the existence of civilization (Chesterton 1986, 48-49). During the course of this mission, Syme ends up being elected as 'Thursday'; that is to say, as one of members of the Central Anarchist Council (to preserve secrecy, the members are only known to each other by the name of a weekday), whose president is 'Sunday', a big man of tremendous genius with an awe-inspiring aura (Chesterton, 1986, 29-40).

Now, let us return to Žižek's modification of his critique of Chesterton. What Žižek refers to when he stresses that "At the novel's end, the message is precisely the identity of crime and law [...]", is the highly surprising twist in wait for the reader in the final showdown of the novel, where Thursday and the other six members of the Central Anarchist Council, who have all turned out to be undercover policemen just like Syme, confront the president of the Central Anarchist Council, Sunday. Žižek puts it like this:

Here the novel passes from mystery to a metaphysical comedy: we discover two surprising things. First, that Sunday, president of the Anarchist Council, is the same person as the mysterious never-seen

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 41.

chief who hired Syme (and other elite detectives) to fight the anarchists; second, that he is none other than God Himself.

In other words, what Chesterton does here in the final chapter of *The Man Who Was Thursday* is to assert the identity between crime and law, which he indirectly rejects at the beginning of the novel, in the narrative form of the identity between the arch-villain Sunday and the chief of the special police-force; hereby renouncing his earlier ‘insistence on the need for a firm external standard’ (in the form of the law). The other no-less-decisive move that Chesterton makes is, as Žižek notes, to completely change the angle of the book from a detective story to a metaphysical comedy, or perhaps rather a ‘theological thriller’. This shift in perspective underlines Žižek’s real interest in Chesterton’s novel, namely its conception of God.

So, what kind of God is it that Chesterton promotes in the double figure of Sunday/the Police Chief? Žižek answers this question with a short recourse to one of his favourite passages in ‘Chesterton’s theological masterpiece’, *Orthodoxy*. This is a passage that definitely deserves a lengthy reproduction:

When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist (Chesterton 2007, 130).<sup>302</sup>

In other words, the God that Chesterton depicts in narrative terms in *The Man Who Was Thursday* as the split figure of Sunday/the Police Chief, who, as Žižek notes, ‘fights himself’, and who, as Chesterton puts in the above quote, ‘seemed for an instant to be an atheist’, is a God basically characterized by an inner discord, an inner antagonism. Now, in Žižek’s account this raises two serious questions. The first question concerns the locus of this antagonism. That is: is the antagonism that characterizes God due to our limited perception of God; or is this

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

antagonism inscribed into the very heart of God himself? As Žižek puts it: “[...] when God appears simultaneously as the top policeman fighting the crime and the top criminal, does this division appear to our finite perspective (and God is ‘in himself’ the absolute One without divisions)? Or is it, on the contrary that [...] God in Himself *is* the absolute self-division?”<sup>303</sup> The second question concerns the more precise character of this division. That is to say: Is Chesterton’s double-figure, his divided God, in the end a kind of ‘unity of opposites’, a harmonious reconciliation of his two sides, a unity balancing his self-division, or is God really in discord with himself?

As Žižek presents it, Chesterton manages to answer these two questions by virtue of the same modification of his conception of God. This modification is enacted by Chesterton (1986, 183), when, at the very end of the novel, Sunday/the Police Chief (God) as a reply to Syme’s question if he has ever suffered the same way as the members of the council have suffered while fighting him, answers: “[...] ‘can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?’” Thus, the attentive reader of *The Man Who Was Thursday* will, as Žižek remarks, have noted how we have here not merely a duality of the evil Sunday and the good Police Chief, but rather a trinity of the features of God. In Žižek’s words: “[...] the whole point of the novel’s final pages is that, to the opposition between the benevolent God of peace and cosmic harmony and the evil God of murderous rage, one should add a third figure, that of the *suffering* God.”<sup>304</sup> The fact that God in Chesterton’s reading is a ‘suffering God’ means first of all that God is involved with his creation, indeed involved in the suffering and discord of his creation, like Sunday/the Police Chief is involved in the suffering of the members of his council/taskforce. And thus to answer the first of the above questions: God is not beyond, untouched by, the antagonism personified in the double figure of Sunday and the Police Chief, God does not merely ‘appear’ as divided in our finite perspective. On the contrary, in the figure of a suffering God (Christ) this antagonism, this division, is incarnated in God himself, most unmistakably of

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 47. Žižek (PD 125-126) presents a similar portrayal of God already in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* where he states that: “God is neither just nor unjust, simply impotent.” Yet, in this text Žižek does not relate the conception of God as impotent/suffering to Chesterton, but to the *Book of Job*. However, in “From Job to Christ” Žižek does, as we shall see, in return make a link between Job and Chesterton precisely on this point.

course in Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross, 'Father, why have you forsaken me?'. So, to answer the second question: Insofar that God *is* this self-division voiced on the cross, there cannot be a harmonious divine reconciliation of the antagonism, a suffering God cannot be a balanced 'unity of opposites'. This is a crucial point, because as Žižek stresses:

The insight into the speculative identity of Good and Evil, the notion of God's two sides, peaceful harmony and destructive rage, the claim that, in fighting Evil, the good God is fighting himself (an internal struggle), is still the (highest) *pagan* insight. It is only the third feature, the suffering God, whose sudden emergence resolves this tension of God's two faces, that brings us to Christianity: what paganism cannot imagine is such a suffering God.<sup>305</sup>

I will elaborate on this decisive issue of Žižek's conception of the Christian God as a suffering God in a moment, but first let us pursue Žižek's reading of Chesterton in "From Job to Christ" a little further to see how the latter finally overcomes the (masculine) logic of the constitutive exception with regard to his notion of God, laying open the road 'towards a materialist theology'.

#### *Towards a Materialist Theology*

Near the end of his discussion of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Žižek notes how the issue of suffering, introduced by Chesterton in the final chapter of the novel, cannot but bring to mind the *Book of Job*, and therefore also Chesterton's short, brilliant "Introduction to the Book of Job." What primarily interests Žižek in Chesterton's commentary on this biblical text, is how Chesterton stresses that the *Book of Job* does not provide any satisfactory answer to why Job suffers, to why God tests Job, or in Chesterton's wording, to why God refuses to 'explain his design'. And more importantly, commenting on this reaction by God, Chesterton (1916, xxii) remarks that: "The refusal of God to explain His design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man." In other words, in Chesterton's view, what God does when he is confronted with the 'riddle' of Job's suffering is he relocates this riddle. As Žižek explains: "[...] he [God] resolves the riddle by supplanting it with an even more radical riddle, by redoubling the riddle, by transposing the riddle from Job's mind into the

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<sup>305</sup> Žižek, "From Job to Christ: A Pauline Reading of Chesterton," 47-48.

thing itself—he comes to share Job’s astonishment at the chaotic madness of the created universe [...].”<sup>306</sup> Thus, what Chesterton performs here in his reading of the *Book of Job* is of course the properly dialectical move from ‘in-itself’ to ‘for-itself’ that Žižek (TTS 55) describes in *The Ticklish Subject* as “[...] the crucial Hegelian gesture of transposing epistemological limitation into ontological fault.”

Moreover, it is against this backdrop we should understand Žižek’s claim, a few sentences further into the text, that through this reading Chesterton succeeds in exceeding the logic of the constitutive exception. Or as he puts it specifically in regard to Chesterton’s conception of God:

God is here no longer the miraculous exception that guarantees the normality of the universe, the unexplainable X who enables us to explain everything else; he is, on the contrary, himself overwhelmed by the overflowing miracle of his Creation. Upon a closer look, there is nothing normal in our universe — everything, every small thing that is, is a miraculous exception; viewed from a proper perspective, every normal thing is a monstrosity. For example, we should not take horses as normal and the unicorn as a miraculous exception even a horse, the most ordinary thing in the world, is a shattering miracle. *This* blasphemous God is the God of modern science, since modern science is sustained precisely by such an attitude of wondering at the most obvious.<sup>307</sup>

To further illuminate this assertion and unfold the consequences of the displacement in Chesterton’s notion of God toward a ‘blasphemous God of modern science’ that it implies, Žižek introduces the two logics characterizing Lacan’s (1998, 78-81) ‘formulas of sexuation’ that I described in chapter three. However, let me just give a brief recapitulation of these formulas, roughly following Žižek’s (FTKN 121-123) presentation in *For They Know Not What They Do*. The masculine formula states that: ‘All X are submitted to the phallic function’ [but] ‘there exists an X who is not submitted to the phallic function’. The feminine formula states that: ‘There does not exist any X who is exempt from the phallic function’ [but] ‘Not-all X are submitted to the phallic function’. Now, with this as his implicit basis, Žižek explains that:

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<sup>306</sup> Žižek, “From Job to Christ: A Pauline Reading of Chesterton,” 48.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

Chesterton obviously relies on the ‘masculine’ side of universality and its constitutive exception: everything obeys natural causality—with the exception of God, the central Mystery. The logic of modern science is, on the contrary, ‘feminine’: first, it is materialist, accepting the axiom that nothing escapes natural causality which can be accounted for by rational explanation; however, the other side of this materialist axiom is that ‘not all is rational, obeying natural laws’—not in the sense that ‘there is something irrational, something that escapes rational causality, but in the sense that it is the ‘totality’ of rational causal order itself which is inconsistent, ‘irrational,’ non-All.<sup>308</sup>

As I have argued in chapter three, and as Žižek hints in the above quote, this move from the (masculine) logic of the constitutive exception to the (feminine) logic of non-All also constitutes a passage from idealism to materialism, that is, from a prioritization of transcendence (the exception) over immanence (the universality it is constitutive of) to an inversion of this prioritization in the sense that in genuine materialism “[...] immanence generates the spectre of transcendence because it is already inconsistent in itself” (OWB 61).<sup>309</sup> To sum up, the notion of God that Chesterton, according to Žižek, outlines in his “Introduction to the Book of Job”, and in glimpses such as in the end of *The Man Who Was Thursday* and in the portrayal in *Orthodoxy* of God as being himself an atheist, is above all an incomplete God. That is to say, a God who is as confused and harassed by his own creation as man is, a God who, just like the human beings who believe in him, wavers in this faith, indeed, a God who even suffers the way that man does. And it is precisely due to this claim to God’s incompleteness and even impotence, paradigmatically expressed in Christ’s cry of dereliction, that Žižek holds that the Christian notion of God is compatible with materialism: “[...] within the field of religion, the singular point of the emergence of materialism is signalled by Christ’s words on the cross ‘Father, why have you forsaken me?’ — in this moment of total abandonment, the subject experiences and fully assumes the inexistence of the big Other.”<sup>310</sup>

It is obviously such a reading of Christianity Žižek has in mind when he in the opening of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* asserts that only through a ‘materialist approach’ can we reach

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>309</sup> For a further elaboration of this point see Johnston (2008b, 142-144).

<sup>310</sup> Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin’s choice”, 180



the subversive core of Christianity. But, how should we understand the other part of Žižek's assertion, that is, why do we have to go through this Christian experience of total abandonment or alienation to become a true materialist? And how should we understand Žižek's claim that this is a specifically *Christian* experience? In extension to a remark in *The Monstrosity of Christ* on Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections on Christianity and atheism, Žižek proposes the following statement, which can be read as a rudimentary answer to these questions:

[...] a true materialism not only asserts that only material reality 'really exists,' but has to assume all the consequences of what Lacan called the nonexistence of the big Other, and it is only Christianity that opens up the space for thinking this nonexistence, insofar as it is the religion of a God who dies.

That true materialism assumes the full consequences of the nonexistence of the big Other means, as argued in chapter three, that it assumes the inconsistency, the contingency, of reality itself (PV 79). And this is precisely what the above reading of Christianity stresses: With its conception of the death of Christ as the death of God himself, Christianity does not merely reveal that there is nothing but material reality; rather, it reveals that this material reality is itself inconsistent, incomplete. The specifically Christian aspect of this claim is, as Žižek (PD 15) stresses in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, exactly that in contrast to "[...] the standard form of atheism [where] God dies for men who stop believing in him; in Christianity, God dies for himself." This is not only a proper 'dialectical' materialist reading of Christianity, it is also a non-perverse reading insofar that its emphasis on the death of God undermines any attempt to assume the role of being the instrument of the big Other. Moreover, what also guarantees such a non-perverse reading is that the above understanding of the death of God precludes a sacrificial reading of this death: God does not die for us, he dies for himself. This non-perverse God who dies for himself is a God who refuses to guarantee the meaning of our reality, a God who is no longer above or beyond, but engaged in this reality, as in his answer to Job and in Christ's cry on the cross.

Another key issue in regard to the question of how to avoid a perverse reading of the death of God (i.e. a reading in which God himself remains unaffected by his death and lives on as the

guarantor of our lives) is the issue of resurrection. In short, how can we maintain the idea of resurrection without it meaning that we also restore God as absolute? Not surprisingly, Žižek's (MC 291; cf. MC 267) solution to this problem is Hegelian: "[...] Crucifixion and Resurrection [...] should be perceived not as two consecutive events, but as *a purely formal parallax shift on one and the same event*: Crucifixion is Resurrection—to see this, one has only to include oneself in the picture." Or, perhaps we should rather say that Žižek's Hegelian solution is 'Pauline', because as Žižek (FTKN 78) notes himself, in Paul's gesture of re-reading the death of Christ as 'the greatest triumph':

[...] we encounter again the fundamental Hegelian motif: 'reconciliation' does not convey any kind of miraculous healing of the wound of scission, it consists solely in a reversal of the perspective by means of which we perceive how the scission is already in itself reconciliation – how, for example, Christ's defeat and infamous death are already in themselves reconciliation.

This 'materialist reading', to use Žižek's (MC 287) words, in which 'death and resurrection are strictly contemporaneous' also sheds some light on the subtitle of Žižek's essay "From Job to Christ – A Pauline reading of Chesterton." Indeed, Žižek's point with this subtitle seems to be that if read the way he suggests, what Chesterton performs in the final Chapter of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, in his "Introduction to the Book of Job" and with his reference in *Orthodoxy* to the atheism of the Christian God, is precisely such a Pauline/Hegelian (materialist) move of a 'parallax shift', through which an external difference is transposed into the thing itself. Now let's return to the issue of Žižek's conception of the Christian God as a suffering God.

*'Only a Suffering God'...*

Actually Žižek touches upon the issue of a suffering God already in his brief discussion of Job in the last chapter of *The Puppet and Dwarf*. Here Žižek introduces Job as the key figure in his attempt to develop a quite original account of the origin and specificity of Judaism.<sup>311</sup> As part of this account, Žižek (PD 124-127; cf. FTKN lii-liii; CWZ 161-162; V 152-153) presents the following interesting reading of the story of Job. In Žižek's (PD 125) view Job is not, as it is often claimed, patiently enduring his

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<sup>311</sup> I will not elaborate further on this account here, but instead refer to Adam Kotsko's (2008b, 88-93) lucid outline of it.

suffering with a firm faith in God, quite the opposite, Job complains endlessly, refusing to bear his fate. Moreover, when Job is confronted by his three ‘theologian friends’ with their attempt to justify his suffering (God is just, so he must have done something wrong to deserve this) he refuses to accept this ‘standard ideological sophistry’ as Žižek (PD 125) terms it. What is at stake here according to Žižek, and this is crucial, is not merely the question of guilt, but the issue of the meaning(lessness) of Job’s suffering, because, as Žižek (PD 125) stresses, what is distinctive in the story of Job is precisely Job’s insistence on the meaninglessness of his suffering – a meaninglessness, which according to Žižek (PD 125), is confirmed by God himself when the latter takes Job’s side at the end of the story, claiming that it was Job, and not his ‘theological friends’, who spoke the truth. Žižek’s (PD 125; cf. FTKN lii; CWZ 161) startling conclusion is that by this refusal to ascribe meaning to Job’s suffering, *The Book of Job* probably constitutes the first example of a critique of ideology in human history. And in a long comment on Job in one of his conversations with Glyn Daly, Žižek (CWZ 161) gives the following elaboration of what he has in mind by this claim: “[...] the moment you accept suffering as something that doesn’t have a deeper meaning, it means that we can change it; fight against it. This is the zero level of critique of ideology – when you don’t read meaning into it.” One could of course make the objection against Žižek on this point that rejecting the meaning of one’s suffering could just as well be made with reference to God: there is no meaning to my suffering, because the ways of God are inscrutable. However, Žižek (MC 54-55; cf. V 153) explicitly rejects such an idea that ‘the ways of God as inscrutable’ in *The Monstrosity of Christ*:

The legacy of Job precludes such a gesture of taking a refuge in the standard transcendent figure of God as a secret Master who knows the meaning of what appears to us to be a meaningless catastrophe, the God who sees the entire picture in which what we perceive as a stain contributes to global harmony. [...] Christ’s death on the Cross thus means that we should immediately ditch the notion of God as a transcendent caretaker who guarantees the happy outcome of our acts, the guarantee of historical teleology—Christ’s death on the Cross is the death of *this* God, it repeats Job’s stance, it refuses any ‘deeper meaning’ that obfuscates the brutal reality of historical catastrophes.

In *The Puppet and the Dwarf* Žižek presents another more indirect argument against this notion of God as a secret Master who sees the complete meaningful picture of what man merely perceives as a meaningless stains. While stressing the same parallel between Job and Christ in terms of meaningless suffering as indicated in the above quote, Žižek (PD 125-126) also notes a decisive difference between them insofar as “[...] in the case of Christ, the gap that separates the suffering, desperate man (Job) from God is transposed into God Himself, as His own radical splitting or, rather, self- abandonment.” What this difference does is precisely to underscore the rejection in the Christian tradition of God as a transcendent omnipotent and omniscient Master: In Christianity the ways of God are not inscrutable, quite the contrary, as Žižek (PD 127) notes, Christianity is the religion of revelation and what it reveals is precisely that there is nothing hidden: God *is* this suffering, impotent, doubting man hanging on a cross.

In regard to the specific context of this dissertation, one particular noteworthy consequence of this recognition of a critical insistence on meaninglessness in Judeo-Christian tradition is that it leads Žižek to question the range of Badiou’s definition of religion as the equation of truth and meaning. While he does not explicitly state anything like that in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek does indicate such a critique of Badiou in *The Parallax View*. Commenting on Badiou’s suggestion in an interview from 2004 that the simplest definition of religion is the idea that truth and meaning are identical, Žižek (PV 181) stresses his agreement with Badiou that this gap between meaning and truth should be emphasized as the minimal difference separating religious idealism from materialism. Adding that Badiou is also right in advancing two opposing attitudes towards this gap between meaning and truth: a postmodern renouncement of truth all together in preference to the multiplicity of meaning, *versus* a stance that engages in discerning a dimension of truth outside meaning, that is, in short, as Žižek (PV 181) puts it in Lacanian parlance, “[...] the dimension of truth as *real*.” However, in the subsequent section of the book entitled ‘When God Comes Around’, Žižek (PV 182) modifies and elaborates on the first of these claims in a very relevant way, suggesting that Badiou’s above definition of religion does perhaps not capture all religions:

The key question about religion today is: can all religious experiences and practices in fact be contained within this dimension of the conjunction of truth and meaning? Does not Judaism, with its imposition of a traumatic Law, adumbrate a dimension of truth outside meaning (which is why Judaism is the mortal enemy of any Gnostic obscurantism)? And, at a different level, does not the same go for Saint Paul himself?

In Žižek's (PV 182) view, the best way to clarify this question would be by examining a situation in which religion itself faces "[...] a shock which dissolves the link between truth and meaning, a truth so traumatic that it resists integration into the universe of Meaning." The paradigmatic example of such a situation is of course when theology faces the problem of evil, the question of how to reconcile the existence of God with the fact of the phenomena of excessive evil such as the Holocaust. Now, according to Žižek (PV 183), the traditional theological responses based upon an insistence on the omnipotence of God are basically the following: that evil is God's punishment, that evil is God's way of testing our belief, or that evil is simply an indication of how God works in mysterious ways. However, there is, Žižek (PV 184) says, also another theological answer to this problem, which refers to "[...] a God who—like the suffering Christ on the Cross—is agonized, assumes the burden of suffering, in solidarity with human misery". And he (PV 184) elaborates on this notion of a suffering God in the following helpful way:

[...] God's suffering implies that he is involved in history, affected by it, not just a transcendent Master pulling the strings from above: God's suffering means that human history is not just a theatre of shadows but the place of real struggle, the struggle in which the Absolute itself is involved, and its fate is decided.

With this characterization of God as 'suffering', Žižek joins the company of some of the most important protestant theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for whom the issue of God's passibility has been absolutely fundamental.<sup>312</sup> Although Žižek himself is perhaps not entirely aware of this context, he nevertheless immediately

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<sup>312</sup> See Richard Bauchham's article "'Only the suffering God can help': divine passibility in modern theology" for a helpful survey. This focus on God's passibility among (especially) contemporary protestant theologians is probably closely linked with the Luther renaissance and in particular his 'theologia crucis' that has taken place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

after the passage quoted above explicitly refers to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 'profound insight' that 'only a suffering God can help us'. Another prominent example could be Jürgen Moltmann (1974, 10), who in his short essay, "The Crucified God and Apathetic Man", makes the following statement setting him fully on par with Žižek: "A theology after Auschwitz would be impossible [...] were not God himself in Auschwitz, suffering with the martyred and the murdered. Every other answer would be blasphemy. An absolute God would make us indifferent." This suffering God is precisely a God who does not reduce the dimension of truth encountered in the *real* of suffering to a dimension of meaning.<sup>313</sup>

Let me end this section and thus my outline of Žižek's thought on the notion of a suffering God in the only proper Žižekian manner, that is, of course, with a joke. In the *Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek (PD 137-138) suggests that the best way to illustrate what he is aiming at with his reference to a suffering God is by means of the following joke. Three guys who have all been condemned for political crimes share the same cell in Lubyanka KGB prison in the late 1930s. While they are getting to know each other the first guy says: "I was condemned to five years for opposing Popov" – a top nomenclature representative at the time. The second guy says: "Ah, but then the Party line changed, and I was condemned ten years for supporting Popov." Finally the third guy says: "I was condemned for life, and I *am* Popov." I probably hardly have to point out that the structure of this joke constitutes the materialist-theological logic par excellence, the logic of incarnation: God/Popov abolishes the distance between himself and man, and he does so by displacing this external distance into himself, by getting involved in, taking part in, the sufferings and alienation of man, by becoming man.

### Concluding Remarks

I would like to conclude this chapter with a brief reflection on a more general level of the theological implications of Žižek's engagement with theological tradition with regard both to the

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<sup>313</sup> As Žižek (PV 184) also notes, Bonhoeffer's suffering God, and more generally the suffering God of modern protestant theology, has a forerunner in German Idealism: "It was Schelling who wrote: 'God is a life, not merely a being. But all life has a fate and is subject to suffering and becoming. . . Without the concept of a humanly suffering God . . . all of history remains incomprehensible'."

field of theology and Žižek's own work. Let us begin with the latter. If we take seriously, as I have tried to do throughout this chapter, on the basis of his reading of Chesterton, Žižek's claim in the opening of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* that genuine materialism and Christian theology mutually presuppose each other, then the role of theology in his work cannot be reduced to the status of an illustration or exemplification on par with his use of obscene jokes and pop-cultural references;<sup>314</sup> but more importantly, it cannot just be dismissed as a purely negative concern. I will try to illustrate and justify the last part of this assertion a little further through a short discussion of the critique of Žižek's engagement in theology made by John D. Caputo in a review in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* of Žižek's probably most explicitly theological work to date, *The Monstrosity of Christ*.

Near the end of his thorough and well-written review of this book, Caputo directs a rather harsh critique against Žižek. Not only does he question the sincerity in Žižek's engagement with Christianity by suggesting that the latter's interest in theology is the result of a pure coincidence and in the end not even directed against Christianity as such, Caputo also accuses Žižek of merely playing patronizing psychoanalytical games, whose final aim is nothing but the undermining of the 'Christian patient's' belief in God. In Caputo's own words:

[...] we all know that Žižek can very well make his main case with no mention of Christ at all, that he can use the seminars of Lacan, the films of Alfred Hitchcock or the novels of Stephen King just as well. His whole point, as he says elsewhere, is subversive: to build a Trojan-horse theology, to slip the nose of a more radical materialism under the Pauline tent of theology in order to announce the death of God. [...] He discusses Christian doctrines like the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Crucifixion the way an analyst talks with a patient who thinks there is a snake under his bed, trying patiently to heal the patient by going along with the patient's illusions until the patient is led to see the illusion.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Of course, another question is if Žižek's use of obscene jokes and pop-cultural references can be reduced in this way to mere illustrations and exemplification. It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to go into this issue, see instead Todd McGowan's (2007) article "Serious theory" for a discussion of this matter.

<sup>315</sup> Caputo, "The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic? – Reviewed by John D. Caputo"

Well, the only proper answer to this critique is of course the ‘vulgar-psychological’ claim, which persists at the very heart of the theological tradition itself, that Caputo’s ill-concealed indignation is indeed the best indicator of the truth of Žižek’s reading of the gospel, that it proves that Žižek’s reading succeeds in actualizing the scandal of the Gospel. Furthermore, Caputo’s suggestion that Žižek acts like an analyst, whose message is that God is dead, is neither precise nor radical enough; Žižek’s message is rather that God himself is the analyst telling us that he is dead. What Caputo cannot accept is not, as he pretends, Žižek’s (presumed) insincere engagement with theology, but precisely the scandalous (atheist) essence of the Christian message itself: a God who suffers and dies. Caputo will hear nothing of such subversive and speculative talk. Instead of lofty speculations about the monstrous Christ, Caputo clearly prefers the earthbound benevolent figure of Jesus. As he states in the ending lines of his review: “Truth to tell, I think Jesus (who does not even make the index in this book) would have been utterly dumbfounded by this polemic about the metaphysics of Christ.”<sup>316</sup> Thus, in this way Žižek’s theological engagement highlights the tension at the heart of Christian theology between the ‘two beginnings’ of Christianity, between Jesus and Paul.

To Žižek, there is no doubt that the emphasis should be put on Paul as the real founder of Christianity, because “[...] it was Paul who shifted the centre from Christ’s acts and teachings to the redemptive quality of his death.”<sup>317</sup> Or in other words, the only genuine reading of Christianity is Pauline reading.

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Žižek, “From Job to Christ: A Pauline Reading of Chesterton,” 39.





## Conclusion

*We must endure our thoughts all night, until  
The bright obvious stands motionless in cold.*

Wallace Stevens

The point of departure of this dissertation was the decision to examine the theological relevance of Badiou's and Žižek's philosophies. However, as I put it in the introduction to the dissertation, we cannot know from the outset precisely what a decision will allow us to do and where it can take us. We will have to explore. So, where did my decision to explore the theological relevance of Badiou's and Žižek's philosophies take me? And what problems (if any) did it allow me to pose? Let me try to answer these questions by summarizing what I consider to be the most important insights that this dissertation has brought to light.

In general terms I would say that the previous five chapters have shown there is no reason for theology to avoid or evade Badiou and Žižek; on the contrary, their philosophies call for a further theological engagement on several issues. Yet, it should also be clear from the above that this engagement has to be a qualified engagement, that is, an engagement that takes its starting point from a thorough understanding of the philosophical works of Badiou and Žižek in whole. In line with that, the dissertation has argued that even though Badiou clearly engages with 'theological material' as in his book on Paul, in the context of his philosophy as a whole, it makes no sense to read Badiou as part of the so-called 'turn to religion' in contemporary continental philosophy. Rather, as the dissertation has illustrated in the two first chapters, Badiou is extremely critical of, if not outright hostile towards, what he calls 'religion'; it might even be argued that Badiou's philosophy is in its very core anti-religious.<sup>318</sup> And when it comes specifically to Paul, I have argued that Badiou's own interest is of a primarily philosophical character, indeed as Badiou (SP 1) puts it himself: "Basically, I have never really connected Paul with religion." Hence, theologians engaging with Badiou's philosophy would do well to

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<sup>318</sup> As argued by Clemens and Roffe (2008) in their article "Philosophy as Anti-Religion in the Work of Alain Badiou."

keep in mind the sound advice of Étienne Gilson (2002, xiii) that: “The fact that some scholars eliminate god from texts where god is, does not authorize us to put god in texts where god is not.” However, as this dissertation has hopefully shown, this does not imply that Badiou has no relevance to theologians. Rather, it implies that we must be cautious in our engagement with his philosophy, that we must pay great attention to its inherent definitions and detailed distinctions, as for instance the distinction between religion and anti-philosophy. Thus, while Badiou’s attitude towards religion is clearly dismissive, his attitude towards ‘antiphilosophers’ like Paul, Pascal, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, is, as we have seen, far more ambiguous. Furthermore, this notion of antiphilosophy is a much more well-developed and fine-tuned notion than Badiou’s very broad and quite rudimentary notion of religion as ‘the equation of truth and meaning’. In other words, Badiou’s scepticism towards religion does not prevent him from engaging, as we have seen, at length with the writings of significant members of the theological pantheon. What has become clear throughout the present study of Badiou’s reading of key theologians or antiphilosophers such as Paul and Kierkegaard, is that, although this reading is subjected to Badiou’s own philosophical ends, it functions as a powerful reminder of how the Christian tradition contains vital resources to think through a number of essential problems that are still absolutely relevant today in a new way. That is, problems concerning fundamental human issues like: What does it mean to be a subject? Is freedom possible? What is truth? Which brings us to Žižek, because despite their various differences with regard to their engagement with theology, this ability to highlight (whether deliberately or not) significant theological thought resources is certainly a feature that Badiou shares with Žižek.

However, before I turn to Žižek, let me elaborate a little further on the theological relevance of Badiou’s aforementioned critical attitude towards religion, or what I in the second chapter of the dissertation have referred to as Badiou’s ‘critique of religion’. My argument is that this critique is important for theology primarily in terms of its criticism of the contemporary ‘pathos of finitude’, insofar that the lures of this pathos do not merely concern philosophy, but also theology. Thus, Badiou’s critique of the motif of finitude clarifies some of the challenges with which theology is currently confronted, particularly in

regard to the following two issues. First of all, it holds a serious warning for theology of the temptations of so-called 'post-metaphysical' thought. 'Deconstruction', 'weak thought' and other forms of contemporary 'post-metaphysical' philosophy might keep an always undefined space open for religion, but only at the risk of abandoning the very possibility of thinking God, and thus in the end of compromising theology as such. Žižek (MC 94, 254-68), to bring him back into the picture, also touches upon this issue, and in fact he relates to it in a far more direct theological manner, insofar that he explicitly opposes any kind of post-secular or deconstructive theology to what he claims to be the only mode in which the subversive core of Christianity can be preserved, namely as a theology that has its centre in the genuinely Christian idea of the death of God. The other notable reason why Badiou's critique of the metaphysics of finitude is relevant in a theological perspective is that it implies the insistence on an important distinction between what we are and what we can do, between mortality and immortality. Although, Badiou emphasizes the crucial, perhaps absolute, difference between how he perceives of this distinction and the way in which it is (in his view) perceived in Christian theology, it should nevertheless inspire theology to think through what the contemporary potential of this distinction might be. And here, not only Badiou, but also Žižek offers some valuable guidelines. Especially Žižek's attempt to conceptualize the excessive dimension in man to which he relates immortality in terms of the Freudo-Lacanian notion of death drive seems to me to contain a considerable theological potential, specifically with regard to a Christian anthropology. Which is also something that Žižek himself indicates.

Another issue common to Badiou and Žižek that is of utmost relevance to contemporary theology is the issue of materialism. As I have argued, particularly in the third and the fifth chapter of this dissertation, I think that the philosophies of Badiou and Žižek enable the possibility of a very important dialogue between theology and materialism. In fact, this is perhaps their most decisive relevance. But, admittedly, such a dialogue would have to be developed further than this dissertation has been capable of. Hence, I would say, with reference to my introduction, that this is one of the problems that this dissertation poses. While the encounter between theology and materialism in Badiou's case, more specifically in his reading in *Theory of the*

*Subject* of Hegel's dialectics, takes the form of a 'missed encounter', Žižek openly asserts the compatibility, indeed even a mutual presupposition, of (a particular brand of) materialism and theology. More precisely, a theology that accepts the full ontological consequence of the death of God, or in Lacanian terms, the inexistence of the big Other; that is, the acceptance of what Žižek refers to as the incomplete or 'non-All' character of reality. Indeed, this is the acceptance of a materialism that, precisely because it is grounded in nothing but a gap in being, nevertheless involves an element of grace. The crucial key to this dialogue between theology and materialism is, as illustrated in chapter three, above all a specific reading of Hegel's dialectics. That is, a reading which has a sharp eye for how the Hegelian dialectics are inextricably bound up with the Christian doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation. Thus, a fundamental insight here that Žižek shares with important contemporary protestant theologians such as Eberhard Jüngel and Jürgen Moltmann, is that theology would do well to revisit Hegel's philosophy. And indeed, Žižek's greatest relevance is no doubt that he through his Hegelian lens manages to keep theology focused on 'the death of God' as the subversive core of Christianity.

I would like to end this conclusion with a short rudimentary outline of a future avenue of theological research which would take as its starting point Žižek's scattered invitations to think of theology in terms of the Freudian notion of 'metapsychology'; an avenue upon which the present dissertation could be viewed as a preliminary faltering step. In his excellent study, *Žižek's Ontology*, Adrian Johnston develops an implicit classification of Žižek's thought which can serve as a helpful framework for such an outline. In short, Johnston suggests that we distinguish between three different levels and three corresponding conceptions of the crucial notion of the 'void' ('gap', 'minimal difference', 'abstract negativity', 'lack', etc.) in Žižek's philosophical system. Firstly, at the level of *substance*, the void is conceptualized in terms of a 'not-All' reality emphasizing the fundamental inconsistency of being itself. Secondly, at the level of the *subject* the void is conceptualized in terms of the 'death drive' as (the exceptional) human 'nature' enabled by a 'not-All' reality, an incomplete substance. And thirdly, at the level of *subjectivity* the void is conceptualized in terms of 'self-relating negativity' (or a vicious circle between 'subject' and 'subjectivation') which is created by the failed act of

‘subjectivation’, i.e. by the very attempt to fill out the void of the ‘subject’ (the void in human nature in terms of the ‘death drive’).

Against this setting, my wager is that the philosophical system elaborated by Žižek through his parallel reading of German Idealism and psychoanalysis can provide the theoretical framework for what – to borrow Eric L. Santner’s expression – might be termed a future ‘psycho-theology’.<sup>319</sup> The labour of creating such a psycho-theology would draw not merely on Žižek’s theoretical work, but more generally employ the resource of Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalytical theory and German Idealism as the primary lens or optic for a re-reading of the theological tradition. If we thus ‘translate’ the above classification of Žižek’s philosophical system suggested by Johnston into theological terms, we could indicate the following possible starting point and basic guidelines for such a future psycho-theology project. Firstly, at the level of ontology, *the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo* might be re-read as an account of reality as not-All. Secondly, at the level of anthropology, *the doctrine of original sin* might be re-read as an account of the specificity of human ‘nature’ as death drive. And thirdly, at the level of subjectivity, *the doctrine of trinity* might be re-read in a Hegelian manner (Malabou, 2005, 79-130) as an account of not merely divine, but human subjectivity as a vicious circle (God opens a void in himself between God/father and God/son by his very (failed) attempt to fill the void between God and Man). I will end these admittedly very basic suggestions here by risking the claim that the realization of such a project constitutes another problem or challenge posed by the present dissertation.

In a comment on the final lines of Wallace Stevens’ beautiful Poem *Man Carrying Thing*, Badiou notes that it is the destiny of philosophers (and theologians I should say) to ‘endure our thought all night’. And it would indeed, Badiou adds, be the final step of philosophy (or theology for that matter) to see in the morning ‘the bright obvious stand motionless in cold’. “But”, as Badiou willingly admits, “that will never happen. On the contrary, when something happens in the day of living truths, we have to repeat the philosophical act, and to create a new variation.”<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> This wager has of course already been commenced, not only by Santner (2000), but also by people like Clayton Crockett (2007), Marcus Pound (2007) and Kenneth Reinhard (2003).

<sup>320</sup> Badiou, “Philosophy as Creative Repetition”



## Summary (English Summary)

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the theological relevance of the philosophical works of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. The dissertation attempts to do so through five individual, but nevertheless intertwined, studies.

In the first chapter, the dissertation examines Badiou's reading of Paul as he presents it in *Saint Paul – The Foundation of Universalism*. Although this book is thus naturally at the centre of the examination, the chapter is not a regular 'study' of this book as such; rather, the intention is to read *Saint Paul* against the wider background of Badiou's work as a whole. This reading serves a double aim. Firstly, the aim of the first chapter is to clarify the immediate context of the book, and more precisely, to clarify to what extent Badiou, on account of the book, should be read, as has been suggested, in the context of and as part of the so-called 'turn to religion' in contemporary philosophy. This clarification will involve a discussion of Badiou's stance in regard to the question of the relationship between philosophy and theology, and the relationship between religion and politics. Secondly, the aim of the first chapter is to clarify Badiou's broader philosophical intention with his reading of Paul. This will bring the question of Paul's conception of truth to the centre stage.

In the second chapter of the dissertation, the focus is on the question of the role of religion in Badiou's work. Here the dissertation argues that Badiou's engagement with religion is primarily of a polemical and critical character. More specifically, three different, but nevertheless closely interrelated, cases in which Badiou engages polemically with religion are identified and elucidated. Firstly, it is argued that Badiou's persistent polemics against what he repeatedly refers to as the 'motif of finitude' in contemporary culture can be read in terms of a critique of religion, insofar as Badiou (NN 86) explicitly claims that "The obsession with 'finitude' is a remnant of the tyranny of the sacred." Secondly, it is argued that this 'critique of religion', at least to a certain extent, should be linked to Badiou's attempt re-establish the autonomy of philosophy. Thirdly, with Heidegger as the main example, it is argued that Badiou persistently applies terms such as 'religious', 'theological',



‘pious’ and ‘sacral’, as a way to distance himself from or marginalize his philosophical rivals. Moreover, the discussion of Badiou’s notion of truth, commenced in the first chapter, is continued in this chapter in terms of a careful exposition of the specific definition of religion that Badiou founds on an absolute opposition between truth and meaning.

The third chapter focuses on Badiou’s and Žižek’s reading of the doctrines of incarnation and trinity, and with Hegel as the key theoretical reference, it argues that these readings are fully compatible with the conception of materialism that we find in their philosophies. However, as illustrated in a short return to *Saint Paul*, Badiou himself is reluctant to embrace such a reading, while Žižek explicitly indicates the compatibility of his conception of materialism and his reading of Christianity. Against this backdrop it is moreover argued, along with Žižek, that due to his resistance to what he considers to be a too Hegelian, or indeed an all too theological, conception of dialectics, Badiou paradoxically risks nurturing a certain ‘idealist’ or even ‘religious’ tendency in his own philosophy.

The fourth chapter investigates how we should understand the numerous references to immortality made by both Badiou and Žižek, against the backdrop of their theories of the subject and with special focus on the issue of freedom. It is argued that both Badiou and Žižek associate immortality with something inhuman in man, something in which he exceeds his own nature, and that this inhuman, excessive dimension, which paradoxically is precisely what makes man human, is for both of them closely connected to the issue of freedom. Furthermore it is argued that both Badiou and Žižek see freedom as also involving, indeed even relying on, an element of contingency, or in theological terms, a moment of grace. Where both Badiou and Žižek relate the capability of immortality to the notion of the subject, the latter moreover associates it closely to the Freudian notion of ‘death drive’. This notion is at the centre of an important discord between Badiou and Žižek and indicates a theologically relevant difference between them on the issue of immortality. Both Badiou and Žižek associate the death drive with religion, but Žižek does so in an appreciatory way, while Badiou associates the death drive with religion pejoratively by relating it to the theme of finitude.

The fifth chapter elaborates on the issue of materialism, arguing that Žižek perceives the relationship between

materialism and theology as a dialectical relationship, so that genuine materialism and Christian theology mutually presuppose each other. This argument is unfolded through a close reading of Žižek's extensive engagement with the theological writing of G. K. Chesterton who constitutes one of Žižek's most important theological inspirations. It is argued that Žižek's reading of Chesterton constitutes a particularly good illustration of the dialectical relationship that he claims exists between theology and materialism because this reading follows a trajectory in Chesterton's theological thought from an idealist to a proper materialist dialectic.



## Resumé (Danish Summary)

Formålet med denne afhandling er at undersøge og belyse den teologiske relevans af Alain Badiou og Slavoj Žižeks filosofiske forfatterskaber. Undersøgelsen udfoldes i en række individuelle, men ikke desto mindre sammenhængende, studier i form af afhandlingens fem kapitler.

I afhandlingens første kapitel undersøges Badiou's læsning af Paulus, som han præsenterer i bogen *Saint Paul – La fondation de l'universalisme*. Selv om denne bog således er i fokus i det første kapitel, udgør kapitlet ikke en egentlig værkanalyse af Badiou's bog. Sigtet med kapitlet er snarere at læse bogen på baggrund af og i sammenhæng med Badiou's forfatterskab i dets helhed. En sådan læsning tjener et dobbelt sigte. For det første er formålet at afklare den umiddelbare kontekst, som bogen indgår i, og, mere præcist, at afklare om Badiou's position på baggrund af denne bog bør ses, som det er blevet foreslået i dele af receptions litteraturen, i forlængelse af og som en del af den såkaldte 'religionens genkomst' i samtidens filosofi. Denne afklaring vil blandt andet indebære en diskussion af Badiou's ståsted i forhold til både spørgsmålet om relationen mellem filosofi og teologi og til spørgsmålet om relationen mellem religion og politik. For det andet er formålet med det første kapitel at indkredse Badiou's bredere filosofiske anliggende med Paulus. Afsøgningen af dette anliggende bringer spørgsmålet om Paulus' begreb om sandhed i centrum.

I kapitel to indkredser afhandlingen Badiou's definition og brug af religionsbegrebet. Afhandlingen argumenterer her for, at Badiou's engagement med religion primært er af en polemisk og kritisk karakter. Mere specifikt identificerer og belyser afhandlingen tre forskellige, men ikke desto mindre tæt forbundne, tilfælde, hvor Badiou på forskellig vis anvender religionsbegrebet i et polemisk anliggende. For det første demonstrerer afhandlingen, hvordan Badiou's polemik imod det, han henviser til som endelighedens dyrkelse i moderne kultur, kan læses som en form for religionskritik i den udstrækning, at Badiou (NN 86) udtrykkeligt hævder, at: "The obsession with 'finitude' is a remnant of the tyranny of the sacred." For det andet argumenterer afhandlingen for, at denne 'religionskritik', i hvert fald i et vist omfang, skal ses i sammenhæng med Badiou's

forsøg på at genetablere filosofien som en særegen og autonom disciplin. For det tredje viser afhandlingen med Heidegger som det vigtigste eksempel, at Badiou flittigt benytter begreber som 'religiøs', 'teologisk', 'from' og 'hellig' som etiketter til sine filosofiske rivaler for herved at kunne distancere sig fra, eller marginalisere, disse. Desuden fortsætter afhandlingen kapitel to den diskussion af Badiou's sandhedsbegreb, som blev påbegyndt i det første kapitel i form af en grundig gennemgang af den specifikke definition af religion, som Badiou fremsætter på baggrund af en absolut modsætning imellem sandhed og mening.

Kapitel tre har forholdet mellem materialisme og teologi som sit omdrejningspunkt. Her præsenterer afhandlingen en læsning, der argumenterer for, at Badiou's og Žižek's mere eller mindre fragmentariske udlægninger af inkarnationen og treenighedslæren er kompatible med den udformning af (dialektisk) materialisme, som man finder i deres filosofier. Men det illustreres også via en kort omvej tilbage til Badiou's bog om Paulus, hvordan Badiou selv er tilbageholdende med at omfavne en sådan læsning hvorimod Žižek åbenlyst indikerer at hans begreb om materialisme og hans læsning af kristendommen er fuldt ud forenelige. På denne baggrund argumenterer afhandlingen i overensstemmelse med Žižek desuden for, at Badiou i kraft af sin udtalte modvilje imod, hvad han anser for at være en alt for Hegeliansk, eller endog en alt for teologisk, opfattelse af dialektik, paradoksalt nok uforvarende risikerer at fremme en idealistisk eller ligefrem religiøs tendens implicit i sin egen filosofi.

Det fjerde kapitel forsøger på baggrund af en undersøgelse af Badiou's og Žižek's subjektsteorier og med særlig fokus på frihedstematikken at afklare, hvordan vi skal forstå utallige henvisninger til 'udødelighed', som både Badiou og Žižek fremsætter i den senere del af deres forfatterskaber. Afhandlingen argumenterer for, at Badiou og Žižek begge to forbinder udødelighed med noget umenneskeligt i mennesket, noget igennem hvilket mennesket overskrider sin egen natur, og at denne umenneskelige, excessive dimension, som paradoksalt nok netop er det, der gør mennesket menneskeligt, for både Badiou og Žižek er tæt knyttet til spørgsmålet om frihedens mulighed. Endvidere argumenteres der for, at de begge to tænker frihed som noget, der også involverer, sågar afhænger af, et element af kontingens; eller i teologiske termer, et moment af nåde. Afhandlingen demonstrerer, at mens Badiou og Žižek er

enige om at relatere udødelighedstematikken med subjektsbegrebet,anfægter Žižek samtidig en t t forbindelse mellem ud delighed og Freuds begreb om d dsdriften. Endelig viser afhandlingen, hvordan dette begreb om d dsdrift er i centrum for en v sentlig uenighed mellem Badiou og Žižek, som illustrerer en teologisk relevant forskel mellem dem, n r det drejer som om, hvordan vi skal forst  ud delighed. B de Badiou og Žižek associerer d dsdriften med religion, men Žižek g r det p  en p sk nnende m de, hvorimod Badiou valoriserer d dsdriften negativt, fordi han forbinder religion med en viktimiterende dyrkelse af menneskets endelighed.

Det femte kapitel genoptager materialismetematikken fra kapitel tre i et mere sn vert fokus og udelukkende med henblik p  Žižek. Afhandlingen argumenterer for, at Žižek opfatter forholdet mellem materialisme og teologi dialektisk, s ledes at en sand materialisme og kristen teologi gensidigt foruds tter hinanden. Dette argument udfoldes gennem en n rl sning af Žižeks omfattende engagement med den engelske litteraturkritiker, digter, krimiforfatter og 'amat rteolog' G.K. Chestertons teologiske forfatterskab, der udg r en af Žižeks vigtigste teologiske inspirationskilder. Afhandlingen demonstrer, at Žižeks l sning af Chesterton udg r en s rlig god illustration af det dialektiske forhold, som han h vder eksisterer mellem teologi og materialisme, fordi denne l sning eftersporer en forskydning i Chestertons teologiske tanke fra en idealistisk til en genuin materialistisk dialektik.



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